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**EXAMINING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES  
OF OUT GAY AND LESBIAN K-12 EDUCATORS**

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by  
**WILLIAM DEJEAN**

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of  
San Diego State University and the University of San Diego  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

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Dissertation Committee:

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May 2004

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of gay and lesbian K-12 educators who consider themselves out within the classrooms in which they teach. With gay and lesbian issues receiving increased visibility within the K-12 setting, researchers have begun to examine the experiences of gay and lesbian K-12 educators (Harbeck, 1992; Letts IV & Sears, 1999; Jennings, 1994; Kissen, 1996; Parker, 2001; Sanlo, 1999) within this context. Yet few research studies have specifically examined gay and lesbian educators who consider themselves out in the classroom in which they teach.

Five gay male teachers and five lesbian teachers who consider themselves out in the classrooms in which they teach participated in this research. At the time of the study, seven were teaching at the high school level, one at the middle school level, and two within the elementary level.

Using an interpretive methodology, three main research questions framed this study: What are the lived experiences of out gay and lesbian K-12 educators? What are the interconnections between being out, pedagogical beliefs and practices? What factors support gay and

lesbian educators to remain out within their classroom environments?

The research results identify the qualities that define out gay and lesbian educators, explores the connections between identity and literacy belief and practices, and concludes with a discussion of the support structures gay and lesbian educators deem essential in their ability to remain out within their classroom.

To all the teachers  
who helped me find my way

## Acknowledgements

It has been said that it takes a village to raise a child, yet I have now come to see that it also takes a village to raise and support a doctoral student. The following are the women and men who surrounded me with a consistent message of love and kindness throughout this study. Their generosity was an essential component in my ability to complete this work.

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Second, I would like to thank my family and friends for their continued support. They were the cheerleaders, counselors, advisors, financial backers, editors, and dedicated listeners who, as always, reminded me that no dream is ever too big. I will always be appreciative of my mom, my dad, Karen, Rosalie, Mary, Larry, my grandparents, Craig, Jeff, Scott, Aimee, Paula, Lou, Rita, Terry, Ruthie, Allen, and of course Peggy.

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## Definition of Terminology

To alleviate confusion over certain terms that are used throughout this dissertation, the following section is designed to provide clarification as well as definitions.

*Critical pedagogy* is used to describe the art or science of teaching (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 49) whose goals includes the "empowerment of subordinate groups through shared understanding of the social construction of reality" (Livingstone, 1987, p. 8).

*Gay* or *gay man* is used to define a man who forms sexual and affectionate relationships with other men (Mitchell, 1998, p. 55).

Gender is defined to "describe the way that particular characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, values and emotions are assigned and reassigned culturally to a particular sex through socialization processes, including education" (Hollingsworth, 1994).

*Heterosexual* or *straight* is used when describing men and women who find affectionate relationships with the other gender (Mitchell, 1998, p. 55).

Heterosexism is "defined as both the belief that heterosexuality is or should be the only acceptable sexual orientation and fear and hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex" (Blumenfeld, 1922, p. 15).

*Homophobia* refers to "the irrational fear or hatred of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuals or homosexual behavior" (Mitchell, 1998, p. 55).

Throughout this study, homophobia is categorized into *internalized* and *institutional*. Sanlo (1999) defines *internalized homophobia* as the "hatred of one's own homosexuality and intense fear of exposure" (p. xix). *Institutional homophobia* "refers to the ways in which governments, business, and educational, religious, and professional organizations systematically discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation or identity" (Blumenfeld, 1992, p. 5).

*Lesbian* is used to define a woman who forms sexual and affectionate relationships with other women (Mitchell, 1998, p. 55).

The term *out* is used to describe lesbian and gay men who are open about their sexual orientation. It is important to note the argument that being out is not a set location, but often a negotiated position. With regard to gay and lesbian educators, Griffin (Harbeck, 1992) suggests that there are three levels of being out: *implicitly*, *explicitly*, and *publicly*. According to Griffin, gay and lesbian educators who are *implicitly out* "assume that their identity is known" (p.178), while teachers who are *explicitly out* "disclose their gay or lesbian identities to selected people at school" (178). *Publicly out* refers to gay and lesbian educators who are out to the entire school

community. For this study, participants are being selected on the basis of their own self-definition of what it means to be out in their classrooms. That is, participants were selected on the basis that they self identify, on any level, to being out in the classrooms in which they teach.

*Pedagogy* is defined as "the theory of how to teach and share knowledge" (Martinossi, 1998, p. 40).

*Personal literacy* is classified as the "critical awareness of ways of knowing and believing about self that comes from thoughtful examination of historical or experiential and gender-specific backgrounds in school and community language settings" (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000, p. 15). Throughout this study, personal literacies will be grouped according into *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* and *literacies*. *Intrapersonal literacy* is defined as the active exploration of one's own personal literacies. *Interpersonal literacy* is defined as the active exploration of another individual or community's personal literacies.

*Sexual orientation* refers to "the inclination or capacity to develop intimate emotional and sexual relationships with people of the same gender (lesbian, gay), the other gender (heterosexual), or either gender (bisexual)" (Mitchell, 1998, p. 56).



*Transgendered* refers to "individuals whose gender identity and expression, to a varying degrees, does not correspond with their genetic sex" (Mitchell, 1998, p. 20).

## Chapter I

### Research Problem

A teacher in search of his/her freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can rouse young persons to go in search of their own (Greene, 1988, p. 14).

While much of the current debate regarding public education centers on state standards, high stakes assessment, and improved accountability measures, many argue that educational quality and student achievement ultimately rests on the quality of the teacher inside the classroom. According to the report *What Matters Most: Teaching for American's Future*, "There is no silver bullet in education. When all is said and done, if students are to be well taught, it will be done by knowledgeable and well-supported teachers" (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996, p. 10). The American Council on Education's report suggests, "the success of the student depends most of all on the quality of the teacher" (as cited in Intrator 2002, p. xxx).

Yet a quality teacher cannot simply be defined by what a teacher knows or the methods a teacher uses, because education is in essence a social process (Dewey 1938). Because of this, Palmer (1998) argued that the definition

of a quality teacher should be expanded to include who teachers are within the classroom. As he explained, good education ultimately

...comes from the identity and the integrity of the teacher. In every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood - and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning (p. 4).

For Intrator (2002), a teacher who works from his or her

identity and integrity is one who is "passionate, caring, alive, present, inspiring, and real" (p. xxx) within the classroom and Sapp (2001) further explains, "we simply teach who we are. A wounded person teaches woundedness. A person in search of her freedom teaches others to search for their freedom. You can't teach liberation. You have to be liberation" (p. 27).

Yet, for gay and lesbian educators working in the public K-12 school system, these definitions of teacher quality and effectiveness are often unattainable in a system that honors silence, instills fear, and rewards living a "divided" life (Griffin, 1992; Jennings, 1994;

Kissen, 1996). While heterosexual colleagues may use their life experiences and personal stories to build classroom communities or to connect their students to the curriculum, gay and lesbian teachers often must carefully separate themselves from what they say and how they teach.

As Martinossi (1998) reported that gay and lesbian educators who teach in the closet may keep themselves safe from discrimination yet "its oppressive nature can negatively impact their lives and, by extension, their students' as well (p. 3). The implication of such silence in the classroom impacts the curriculum and literacy opportunities within the classroom (Pobo 1999). Pobo then questions, "Does a presentation that incorporates silence give students the impression that there are some questions better not asked about writing, some questions with which the role model is uncomfortable" (p. 27)?

Thus, research examining gay and lesbian K-12 educators who have broken that silence and are out in their classrooms would make an important contribution to the field by not only providing models for other gay and lesbian educators, but by also shedding light on the interconnection between the teacher's self, regardless of sexual orientation, and his or her literacy beliefs, choices, and instructional practices.

### Purpose and Significance of the Study

Invisibility is a dangerous and painful condition. When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you...there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing (Rich, 1986, p. 199).

There are many reasons why the timing is right for research examining the lived experiences of gay and lesbian K-12 educators who consider themselves out in the classroom. First, while gay and lesbian issues have historically always taken place in the K-12 setting, today gay and lesbian discussions have begun to take on more visibility within public schools. For instance, as of 1999, nine states, the District of Columbia, and numerous cities have passed legislation prohibiting employment discrimination based on sexual orientation (Yared, 1997, p. 2). In addition, gay and lesbian campus support groups, such as Gay, Straight Alliances (GSA's) have proliferated on high school and junior high school campuses. For instance, "In March 2000, over 700 GSA's were registered with the National Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) as official student groups" (Lee, 2002, p. 1).

Second, gay and lesbian educators might constitute the largest minority population within the K-12 public school

system. According to National Center for Education Statistics, in 1999 there were 2,206,554 public school teachers in America (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Using Kinsey's outdated but often-quoted estimate of 10 percent (Harbeck, 1997) there are approximately 230,000 gay and lesbian public school teachers in the United States. As Harbeck explained, this number "is equal to the entire teaching staff of the states of California and Washington combined" (p. 17).

Third, due to this increased visibility of gay and lesbian issues in education, as well as the understanding of the large numbers of gay and lesbian teachers within the K-12 setting, many researchers have examined the experiences of gay and lesbian K-12 educators (Harbeck 1992; Jennings, 1994; Kissen, 1996; Letts IV & Sears, 1999; Parker, 2001; Sanlo, 1999). For instance, while Martinossi (1998) investigated the coming out experiences of gay and lesbian educators, few studies have specifically examined gay and lesbian educators who consider themselves out within their classrooms. Data collected in this area might offer important models or tools for gay and lesbian educators who are struggling to negotiate their identity within the K-12 setting.

Fourth, many scholars have argued of a deep interconnection between the teacher's "self" and his or her teaching practice. This connection between self and practice can be seen by the curriculum a teacher chooses to

use within his or her classroom, how he or she interacts with her students, to the way he or she uses language within the classroom. Palmer (1998) points to this connection when he explains

In the undivided self, every major thread of one's life experience is honored, creating a weave of such coherence and strength that it can hold students and subject as well as self. Such a self, inwardly integrated, is able to make the outward connections on which good teaching depends. (p. 15)

Darder (2002) further explains, "where we're born, where we grow up, where we are schooled, where we work, and where we live all impact our linguistic expression" (p. 128). Or as Thich Nhat Hanh also argues, "the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher, or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many" (as cited in hooks, 1994, p. 15). Thus, the examination of gay and lesbian educators might provide an important space for all teachers, regardless of their sexual orientation, to consider how their *selves* impact their instruction, their literacy choices, as well as the creation of their classroom community.

## Research Questions

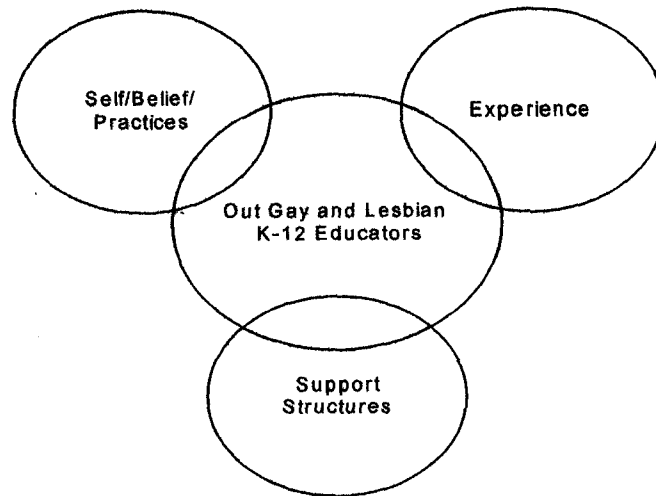


Figure 1.1

### Research Questions Framework

Taking a qualitative approach, three research questions (Appendix B) frame this study examining the experience of out gay and lesbian K-12 educators:

1. What are the lived experiences of out gay and lesbian K-12 educators?
2. What are the interconnections between being out, pedagogical beliefs, and pedagogical practices?
3. What factors support gay and lesbian educators to remain out within their classroom environments?

### Personal Motivations

Years ago a colleague confided in me that her scholarly research was really a search to understand herself, and in her view, most people were in search of themselves.



She concluded that the work of researchers was often personal. Those thoughts have resonated with me over time. In many ways it is impossible to separate the personal from the professional. It seems only human that we want to know about the world, but more specifically, we want to know about our world. (Wolfe & Pryor, 2002, p. 153)

There are two main experiences that have led me to this study as well as influenced the kinds of questions I have explored. The first is my own experience as a gay male high school teacher.

I remained in the closet my first few years teaching, yet finally came out to my classes four years later when I began to believe the cost of remaining silent was negatively impacting the classroom discourse community (Cazden, 2001) I was trying to build. As a high school English teacher, the closet was limiting the types of discussions I would "allow" or the type of material I would bring into the room. During this time, students often mentioned that I repeatedly created a "line in the sand" in our classroom and with them. It became obvious to me that having to conceal my identity was impacting the literacy opportunities of the classroom of the classroom as a whole.

After I came out, I interviewed six of my students (DeJean, 2001) about the experience and found that coming out impacted not only my connections with my students, but it also impacted the learning community of the class as a whole. As one student explained, "this act of honesty caused the class to unite as a family" (DeJean, 2001, pg. 10) as well making our classroom a safer place to learn.

Yet, even after I came out, I found that I was still negotiating my identity within my classroom, and began to wonder what the experiences were of other gay and lesbian educators who are out in the classrooms in which they teach.

The second experience centers on my interactions with gay and lesbian youth and their families. I believe having gay and lesbian educators who are out at the schools in which they teach will not only break stereotypes surrounding the gay and lesbian community, but will also provide healthy role models for gay and lesbian youth. I came to this conclusion because once word got out that I was a gay teacher, I began to be contacted by numerous gay and lesbian teens as well as their parents who called me in search of support and mentors.

As a result of these experiences, I conducted this research to answer the questions I had been wrestling with

as a gay male high school teacher as well as to support other gay and lesbian K-12 educators who wish to move from a place of fear and hiding to a more authentic state within the classrooms in which they teach.

## Chapter II

### Review of the Literature

This study is designed to examine the lived experiences of gay and lesbian K-12 educators who consider themselves out within the classrooms in which they teach. The following chapter is a presentation of the literature reviewed that assists in framing this current study within a larger historical, social, and pedagogical framework. To do this, this chapter explores the history of gay and lesbian K-12 educators, examines homophobia within the school setting, addresses the issues facing gay and lesbian educators, and concludes with a presentation of the interconnections between identity and pedagogical approaches towards literacy.

#### *Introduction*

I did not think I could become a teacher. No one specifically told me that as a gay man I could not teach. There was never a notice issued from the governor, or a letter sent out to prospective teachers about the issue. But I knew. Yet, after hearing my concerns for months, it was my college roommates who finally convinced me to mail my application in to the teaching credential program.

Looking back, it is not surprising that I believed this. I never saw myself in high school. Literature in

English never included me. I never knew of a teacher who was gay, or ever heard the words gay or lesbian mentioned; it was always faggot or dyke. In every aspect of high school, my story was never told, or if it was told, it was through rumor and lies.

Sitting at the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educator's Network (GLSEN) booth searching for participants for this study during gay and lesbian Pride weekend, my same story was repeated numerous times. Throughout the two-day event, many gay men and women who had just graduated from college came to the table to discuss the prospects of entering the profession. The majority of those I spoke with had decided they couldn't be gay or lesbian and teach. "I simply do not want to go back into the closet," one woman plainly stated.

Yet, what our experiences and memories of our own schooling did not reveal was that not all cultures and societies have had the same response to gay and lesbian educators. As de la Huerta (1999) points out,

Among many Indigenous cultures many homoerotically inclined or gender-variant individuals were recognized, honored, and occasionally even feared for their roles as spiritual leaders. These humans were considered to bridge the male and female worlds and were at times

thought of as a third gender, believed to be imbued with special powers. They were also said to walk between the worlds of matter and spirit. (p. 7)

Thus within this context, gay and lesbian individuals were not seen as a threat to the family or the society, but rather "were incorporated into the kinship system in a productive and nondisruptive manner" (Blumenfeld 1922, p. 256). In fact, as Williams points out, "because they (gay men and women) often have the reputation for intelligence, they are encouraged in some tribes to become teachers" (Blumenfeld, 1922, p. 268).

#### *History of Gay and Lesbian K-12 Educators*

Yet from a Western, mostly North American context, the history of gay and lesbian educators has been far different. While it appears that gay men and women have always been in education in one form or the other, their openness and public acceptance has changed over the course of time. Harbeck (1992) argues that

In terms of an individual's experience, we do know that since colonial times the most common scenario is one of a person living an exemplary life in fear of discovery. In that rare instance when his or her homosexual orientation became known, the teacher quietly resigned

or quickly left town, since the potential consequences of challenging the system alone were extreme. (p.123-124)

Thus, historically, fear and hiding have marked the life of many lesbian and gay teachers (Harbeck 1992). The effects result in lesbian and gay educators living divided lives, watching what they say, and carefully crafting the lessons they will teach (Griffin, 1992; Harbeck, 1992; Kissen, 1996; Harbeck, 1997; DeJean, 2001).

In many ways, the turning point in gay and lesbian identity began in the 1940s and 1950s, which was marked by gay men and women moving to larger cities and increasingly becoming more visible. "It was at this time that Senator Joseph McCarthy began his witch-hunting tactics, which successfully linked homosexuality and Communism in the minds of most Americans" (Harbeck 1992, p.125).

In the 1950s, California Penal Code Section 291 required police officials to notify local boards of education whenever a teacher was detained or arrested in a criminal matter. Education Code Section 12756 permitted the immediate suspension of teaching credentials if an educator was convicted of any one of several statutes pertaining to sex and morality (Harbeck, 1992, p. 125).

Not until the 1960s did a change in legal status begin to protect gay, lesbian, and bisexual educators.

The California Supreme Court's decision in *Morrison v. State Board of Education* called for an extensive analysis of the individual's behavior in relation to his or her job responsibilities before employment dismissal was possible. Furthermore, the Court announced that the status of being a homosexual was insufficient ground for dismissal unless coupled with some related misbehavior (Harbeck, 1992, p.126).

Even as the courts were beginning to make their first ruling of protection for lesbian and gay teachers in 1978, Senator John Briggs (R-California) introduced the Briggs Initiative. Passage of the Briggs initiative would have barred the state's public school system from hiring gay teachers, and would have mandated the removal of any teacher who was discovered to be gay after he or she was hired.

The Briggs initiative was eventually defeated, but the message was clear to gay and lesbian educators: it is not safe for you.

The 1990s were defined by an increase in local and state laws supporting equal protection for gay, lesbian, and bisexual employees with many school districts adding



sexual orientation to their nondiscrimination policies. Yet even with new laws and resolutions, the challenges faced by many gay and lesbian teachers often depends on the states, counties, and school districts in which they work and live.

### *Homophobia and School*

To understand the challenges facing gay and lesbian educators, it is important to understand the nature and organization of homophobia that is often embedded in many educational structures; often these are the same systems that gay and lesbian educators faced as students inside the classroom.

Weinberg (1972) defined the popular term "homophobia" as the fear and hatred against gay men and lesbians, as well as discomfort and self-hatred gay men and lesbians have about their own homosexuality. Homophobia can be seen as an institutional event, or an internalized process. Examples of institutional homophobia may be as simple as refusing to acknowledge the existence of gays and lesbians or can be as severe as verbal and physical attacks. Institutional homophobia can manifest itself through the deletion of gay and lesbian issues within the school curriculum, a lack of services and support for gay and

lesbian youth, or to youth being assaulted due to being perceived as gay or lesbian.

Internalized homophobia occurs when one experiences self-contempt, because of one's own homosexuality (Elia, 1993, p. 179). Often such an internalized negative self-concept is framed within the educational setting, where few images or positive messages are given to gay and lesbian youth. It is within this environment of institutional homophobia that many youth internalize their identity into self-contempt.

Jennings (1998) argues,

I believe that the roots of virtually all of our (gay/lesbian/bisexual) community's problems go back to what we experienced as kids, especially in school. It is in our school years that we learn the lesson, which our educational system imparts best to young people: Hate yourself. We spend most of our lives trying to unlearn that lesson. (p. xiv)

For many gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults, school was marked by isolation, silence, and fear. While the school setting, whether in individual classroom discussions or school assemblies, frequently addressed and discussed issues such as racism or sexism, the issue of gay and lesbian issues and harassment was often ignored or

disregarded if it did come up (Jennings, 1998).

Avoiding the topic of homosexuality in most public school settings leaves students who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, to find a way for themselves. Rich (1996,) argues that such,

Invisibility is a dangerous and painful condition (because) when those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see or hear you... there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. (199)

Thus, while school for many students is a place to explore and to form their identity, for gay and lesbian youth, the quiet simple message is they do not belong. When lesbian and gay students do not see themselves reflected in their mentors or teachers, as part of the curriculum, or positioned in their educational work, the result is often silence. This silence and lack of positive self-image affects how gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth view who they are and how they fit into the world.

Homophobia takes a terrible toll on these adolescents. It is estimated that 53% of high school students hear homophobic comments made by teachers and other staff and that 19% of gay and lesbian students suffer physical attacks associated with their sexual orientation (USA Today

Magazine, 1997, p. 11). It has also been estimated that nearly 30% of teen suicides are comprised of gay and lesbian youth (O'Connor, 1994).

However, gay and lesbian youth are not the only individuals impacted by homophobia within the school setting. Homophobia forces boys and girls, regardless of their sexual orientation, to fit into tightly constructed gender identities. For boys especially, "homophobia serves to police the ways in which masculinity is defined within a school setting" (Scully, 2001, p. 1). Consequently, students who step out of the masculine normative are suspect. Boys who appear outside of these narrow gender definitions are referred to as *faggots* or other derogatory names. Because of these rules for masculinity, many adolescent boys become hypermasculine or act "macho" in order to prove their heterosexuality (Elia, 1994) and ultimately to protect themselves.

For males within this structure, anything that is seen as feminine is a threat. Blumenfeld (1992) points out that "some psychologists believe that all people contain both a feminine and a masculine aspect and that, for individuals to be fully integrated, it is important that they recognize, appreciate, and nourish both" (p. 38). Yet, for fear of being thought of as gay, or because of disdain,

many boys often must suppress and disconnect aspects of their being.

Scully (2001) examined attitudes and experiences of boys within her school setting. Her ethnographic data collection included tape-recorded classroom dialogues, interviews of students in the campus and examined all written work produced by students in her classes. Scully found that males who did not fit the normative model of masculinity "were made fun of, ostracized, and generally humiliated" (p. 2). To her amazement, boys in her study viewed homophobic harassment as a normal part of their school life and experience.

While homophobia often causes boys to narrowly construct their masculine identity to avoid harassment, girls are affected as well. Girls who do not fit into sanctioned female gender norms are "likely to be called dykes, bull dykes, lezzies and other objectionable terms" (Elia, 1993, p. 179). This narrow heterosexual feminine construct can best be seen with female athletes who often have their heterosexuality questioned when they choose to participate in campus sports. Frequently these young women athletes "respond defensively to this label and go to great lengths to display traditional heterosexual markers through clothing, hair style, and mannerism" (Griffin, 1994, p.

83). Moreover, the fear of being labeled a lesbian discourages many girls from participating altogether (Griffin, 1994).

Thus school settings have embedded in them narrow, stringent rules regarding sexuality and gender (Elia, 1993), that directly impacts gay and lesbian students as well as their heterosexual peers.

Baker (2002) explains that "many gay students hide their orientation at school so successfully that no one ever suspects" (p. 85). For gay and lesbian teachers, regardless of their openness or even awareness of their sexual orientation as students, choosing to become a teacher often means returning to the same stifling homophobic structures they experienced as students.

#### *Gay and Lesbian Teachers*

As noted earlier, it is estimated that gay and lesbian teachers might constitute the largest minority population within the K-12 setting (Harbeck, 1997), yet available literature that describes their lives is limited (Sanlo, 1999). Griffin (1992) points out that there are fewer than ten studies that specifically focus on the professional experiences of gay and lesbian educators (p. 168). Emerging literature is beginning to highlight the impact of this intersection of gay and lesbian educators personal and

professional identities, revealing gay and lesbian educators who are working in fear, are finding ways to manage their identity, and who are often struggling to find ways to be more open and authentic within the K-12 setting.

*Fear.* "Historically, American educational institutions have been used to advance majority views" (Harbeck, 1997, p. 19). Within this system, teachers play an important role imparting values and ideas to students. Because of this, gay and lesbian educators often ignite controversy and debate, as some communities see their presence as a threat to established values and traditional educational discourses (Harbeck, 1992). Kissen (1996) argues that

Because of this, to be a lesbian or gay teacher, in most schools, is to walk a constant line between safety and honesty. The very qualities of trust and authenticity that lie at the heart of all good teaching are often incompatible with their physical and emotional well-being. (Often) acknowledging a gay identity means rethinking the whole notion of being a teacher. (p. 16)

This concept of being a teacher takes on a new form for gay men and lesbians who must think before they speak or censor what they say. While their heterosexual colleagues may use their life experiences and personal stories to

connect their students to the curriculum (hooks, 1994; Palmer, 1998; Parker, 2001), gay and lesbian teachers often must carefully separate themselves from what they say and how they teach (Yared, 1997). Pobo (1999) explains that some closeted gay and lesbian educators, in order "To protect themselves...censor their own syllabi and discussions-to the point of presenting inaccurate and homophobic information about the course material studied" (p. 2).

For many, teaching from a divided self creates internal conflict. This is because teaching emerges from one's identity, which often mirrors a teacher's inner world (Palmer, 1998). For many gay and lesbian educators, that mirror often reflects fear: fear of losing their jobs; losing student respect and control; or fear of community reaction (DeJean 2001; Jennings 1994; Harbeck 1992; Kissen 1996; Sanlo 1999; Woods & Harbeck 1991). Frequently, these educators simply remain silent and isolated on the job because they fear that in most areas they can be fired simply because of their sexual orientation (Kissen 1996; Sanlo 1999). "For those who consider teaching to be their primary identity, the thought of never being able to teach again is devastating" (Kissen, 1996, p. 73).



However, early research suggests that gay and lesbian educators' level of openness and sense of fear may be indicative of the region in which they teach. Juul's (1995) study of 904 gay, lesbian, and bisexual public school teachers concluded that teachers working within suburban and rural areas were less open and more anxious as compared to their urban counterparts. This might reflect the fact that suburban and rural settings are often "bound by members with more commonly held beliefs, values, and experiences" (Sears, 1991, p. 71). As Juul (1995) argues, the more homogenous the community, the more likely any number of social characteristics could be considered non-conformist. Being Black, Jewish, foreign born, or a strong female could all be grounds for non-conformist, as could holding divergent social or political views. (p. 6)

*Identity Management Strategies.* Because of this fear, gay and lesbian educators must often find ways to negotiate their identity within the professional system.

Griffin (1992) examined strategies that gay and lesbian teachers used to negotiate this public/private split. The continuum included being "totally closeted" (being out to no one at school), "passing" (actively trying to appear heterosexual), "covering" (censoring what he or she says),

being "implicitly out" (assuming people know), being "explicitly out" (disclosing sexual orientation to a select few), to being "publicly out" (out to entire school community) (p. 177).

When gay and lesbian educators teach subjects not consistent with sanctioned gender roles (e.g., male librarian, female athletic teacher, etc.) the need to navigate Griffin's continuum increases in urgency (Woods & Harbeck, 1991). Within this paradigm, lesbian physical education teachers might be the most at risk. "For those who believe that homosexuals are child molesters that recruit young children to their ranks, just the presence of a lesbian physical educator doing her job is cause for concern and homophobic accusations (Woods & Harbeck, 1991, p. 143).

Woods and Harbeck (1991) confirmed this private/public split with their study of twelve lesbian physical education teachers. Their findings revealed that these teachers used numerous strategies to conceal their identity because they believed they would be fired if their sexual orientation were discovered. These strategies included trying to pass as heterosexual, self-distancing from students, teachers, and the administration, and self-distancing from issues dealing with homosexuality. They conclude that the energy

required to maintain their assumed identity was a daily struggle for some which often drained their energy and effectiveness as educators (Woods & Harbeck 1991). It is for these reasons that many gay and lesbian teachers finally come out.

*Coming Out.* For many teachers, maintaining this private/public split simply becomes too personally and professionally difficult. While for others, the memory of their own school experience causes them to want to be more open at the schools in which they teach, especially if they are working at the same schools they attended as closeted gay and lesbian youth (Jennings, 1994). Therefore, many gay and lesbian teachers try to find ways to move on the continuum from "passing" and "covering" into more authentic ways of being at the schools in which they teach. This is because, as Sullivan (1993) argues

there is another myth about simply keeping your private life private and nobody being any the wiser.

Psychologically, there is a world of difference between choosing not to tell your workmates about your personal life and being afraid they will find out. (p 1-2)

Coming out at school is often a gradual process during which teachers "test the waters, and reassure themselves that the support is there" (Kissen, 1996, p. 161). This

might include coming out first to one member of the faculty, joining a gay and lesbian educators organization for support, or being out to select students on the campus.

Currently little research specifically addresses the coming out experiences of gay and lesbian K-12 educators. While Jennings (1994) and Kissen (1996) have documented the personal narratives of gay and lesbian K-12 educators who were trying to bridge this personal and profession divide, Martinossi (1998) is the only researcher to specifically examine the phenomenon of gay and lesbian educators who have come out to the classes in which they teach. His analysis of 10 gay and lesbian educators concludes that they came out to their classes for personal, professional, and socio-political reasons.

For instance, personal reasons included the need to be honest with their students as well as frustration with homophobia embedded in the campuses in which they taught. For others, professional reasons were cited based on their pedagogical beliefs, such as "establishing genuine student/teacher relationships as well as the need to function as support for gay and lesbian students" (Martinossi, 1998, p. 110). Finally others discussed socio-political reasons that centered on the belief that coming out would actively help reduce the heterosexism and

homophobia within the school community at large (Martinossi, 1998).

As one teacher in his study explained, I think everybody has the right to come out when they feel ready to come out. A [closeted] colleague asked me: 'How do you do it? Why do you do it?' I told her and she was like: 'Yeah! Yeah! Sometimes I feel like I should come out.' And I said: 'It's not about should or shouldn't. It's about whether you want to. When you are ready, you will' (Martinossi, 1998, p. 133).

#### *Pedagogical Approaches*

"Why do you need to come out to your students?" was the most common question I was asked during my nine years as a high school teacher. Many times this question came from colleagues with whom I had discussed the challenges I was experiencing both personally and professionally as a result of remaining in the classroom closet. Often teachers asking this question were the same ones who wore their wedding rings to work, had pictures of their spouse and children displayed throughout their classrooms, or continued teaching throughout their pregnancy. Typically, the ensuing discussions focused on gay and lesbian issues in education, but quickly changed into heated pedagogical

debates centered on teaching, students and the classrooms we envisioned.

This was not surprising because, as these discussions helped me understand, the type of pedagogy a teacher chooses is often a reflection of the beliefs he or she has about knowledge, what counts as knowledge, and how one's identity fits within his or her pedagogical framework. For this reason, the following section compares the relationships between a teacher's identity within a banking model and critical pedagogical approach.

*Banking Model.* Within a banking system of education, there is little need for a teacher to be authentic or vulnerable with his or her students. That is because, from this perspective, knowledge is provided within a hierarchical structure whereby the teacher provides the student with the knowledge (Freire, 1970). Freire (1970) explains that in this form, "education...becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (p. 72).

Thus in a true banking system, the teacher actively delivers information for students to passively consume and reproduce (Freire 1970; hooks 1994; Palmer; 1993). In this

structure, the teacher is not in partnership with the student (Freire, 1970) but rather holds power over the learner through his or her knowledge of the curriculum. It is a system whereby teachers believe "that they have nothing to learn from their students" (hooks, 1994, p. 152) since they are the sole intellectual authority.

By means of this structure, the teacher/student experience is limited to a cognitive interaction, which often "results in objectifying and debilitating experiences for students, irrespective of their intellectual capacities" (Darder, 2002, p. 98). As Parker (1993) explains, inside such a traditional classroom experience, the center of the study is always focused externally on "someone else's vision of reality. The reality inside the classroom, inside the teacher and the students, is regarded as irrelevant" (p. 37).

Ultimately, with little room for dialogue or critical questioning, a classroom constructed from a banking approach leaves reality held as unquestioned, and the "status quo" left intact (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003).

*Critical pedagogy.* A critical pedagogical approach (Freire 1970; Green 1988; hooks 1994; Livingstone 1978; Palmer 1998; Shannon 1995), offers a different model of

teacher/student interactions, whereby traditional classroom power is distributed so that both the teacher and students engage in a deeper level of personal as well as intellectual partnership with a potential for mutual growth (hooks, 1994). Since the teacher, within this structure, is not the sole authority and/or source of information, community and connectedness (Palmer 1998) become essential for optimum learning to occur.

Cadiero-Kaplan (2002) argues that, "teachers within this model are no longer dispensers of knowledge, promoting only one canon of belief, but agents of change, assisting students in seeing themselves within the larger historical, political, cultural, and economic structures where student voices exist" (p. 379).

In contrast to a traditional banking structure that resists dialogue, dialogue is vital for such optimal learning to occur within a critical standpoint (Freire, 1970). This is because from a critical pedagogical perspective, knowledge is seen as "created collaboratively through social interactions" (Martinossi, 1998, p. 40) between all members of a learning community. Thus, open, free-flowing dialogue within the classroom becomes an essential tool for an effective learning community.



In a classroom that honors dialogue, difference becomes essential. Because of this, Shannon (1995) argues for the importance of a diverse classroom community where all voices can be heard since "others who bring different experiences, discourses, and intentions to the exchange can push comfortable hypotheses and conclusions in helpful ways" (p. 107). For this reason, a classroom whose members appear to be different due to class, race, religion, or sexual orientation becomes an asset for the growth of the classroom community due to the fact that diverse perspectives enable multiple perspectives that assist in challenging traditionally held beliefs and commonly held norms.

However, the extent to which open exchanges are able to occur often is linked to a teacher's willingness to make his or her *self* present within the classroom dialogue (Darder, 2002). A teacher's willingness to bring his or her identity into the fabric of the classroom is essential (Parker, 1998) since a teacher who is fully human inside of the classroom often inspires students to be fully human as well (Dossin, 2003).

*Literacy: New definitions.* Within a banking framework, literacy is narrowly defined in terms of school endorsed skill sets that must be memorized and repeated.

For example, in a traditional language arts setting, what counts as literacy might be defined only by the "ability to read, write Standard English" (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000, p. 5). Regardless of the subject taught, literacy within a banking framework "generally gives people access to a preestablished discourse while silencing their own voices" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 55). Often, within this model, open dialogue is limited since the outcome for curriculum and/or discussion is predetermined.

Yet from a critical perspective that views knowledge as built through collaborative exchange, what counts as appropriate literacy includes not only school sanctioned literacy practices but also expands to honor the lived experiences of both the teacher and students. From this standpoint, literacy becomes critical when "it focuses attention on the importance of acknowledging that meaning is not fixed, and that to be literate is to undertake a dialogue with others who speak from different histories, locations and experiences" (Giroux, 1991, p. viii). Within this framework, the teacher and student's personal literacies (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000) become an important aspect of the classroom exchange.

Gallego and Hollingsworth (2000) define personal literacies as the

critical awareness of ways of knowing and believing about self that comes from thoughtful examination of historical or experiential and gender-specific backgrounds in school and community language settings, and can stand as critiques to both school and community literacies. (p. 15)

This becomes important to classroom practice because as Freire & Macedo (1987) argue "reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world" (p. 35). As a result how one speaks, how one reads, or how one learns, is ultimately influenced by one's life experience and his or her conscious interpretation of it. In this view, literacy is "ethical in that people 'read' the world differently depending on circumstances of class, gender, race, and politics" (Giroux, 1991, p. x). A classroom that honors these experiences and perspectives is important for student growth in that it has the ability to push traditional "boundaries of what counts as literacy" (Green, Dixon, Lin, Floriani, & Bradley, 1994, p. 146) and help students become more critical consumers of the word and the world (Moje, Young, Readence, and More, 2004). For this reason, Green, Dixon, Linn, Floriani, and Bradley (1994) explain,

literacy is continually being defined, redefined, constructed, and reconstructed in the social life of a group. The outcome of this process is not a single definition of literacy, but an understanding of the multiplicity of literacies individuals face as they become members of ever expanding groups and communities. (147)

From this perspective, to be literate means more than simply acquiring school sanctioned literacy practices. Being literate means the ability to participate successfully in multiple discourse communities (Gee, 2001). For Gee (2001), a discourse "integrates ways of talking, listening, writing, reading, acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and feeling (and using various objects, symbols, images, tools and technologies) in the service of enacting meaningful socially situated identities and activities" (p. 719). For students, this can mean the ability to function well in a math class, participate in a structured debate, utilize numerous technologies, or the ability to interact with individuals who are different from their primary discourse communities. From a critical perspective then, open dialogue provides the venue for students to interact in secondary discourse communities. This engagement becomes, "powerful literacy, when personal

literacies are used to explore and to critique the primary discourse or other secondary discourses, including dominate discourses" (Gee, 1991, p. 8) and thus expand the collective boundaries of primary discourse.

Because of this, a teacher who brings his or her *self* into the classroom exchange becomes an asset to the classroom as a whole because "teachers who are aware of their own personal literacies might help students see that 'correct' interpretation of a textual event depends upon the boundaries of interpretive possibilities" (p. 16). As a result, a teacher who brings his or her *self* into the composition of the classroom offers a powerful modeling for literacy to open from a narrow school sanctioned practice into a space of possibility (Freire & Malcedo, 1987).

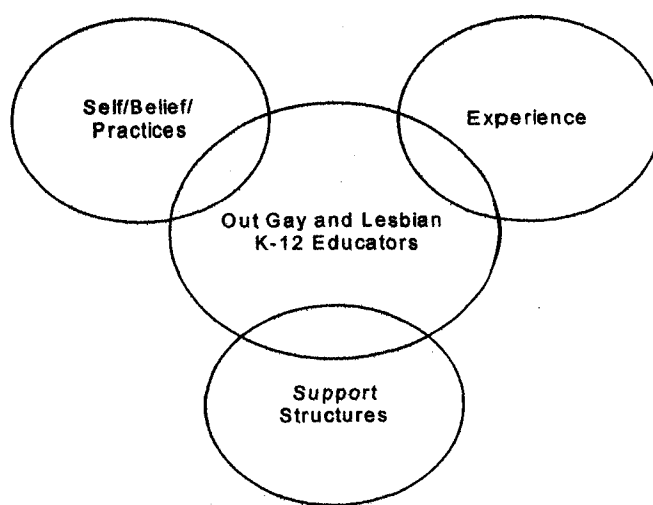
However, for many gay and lesbian educators, creating this classroom structure is more difficult. Fearful of disclosure of their sexual orientation, the teacher's ability to open the literacy door or to elicit open communication either individually with a student or within his or her classroom is greatly hindered, as the teacher often must edit or censor what he or she says, or discourage certain classroom discussion within his or her classroom altogether (Martinossi, 1998).

In the end, this view of the importance of the teacher's self in the service of creating an optimal learning environment should not come as a surprise. This is because as Hamachek (1999) explains, we often

remember our teachers, not so much for what they taught, but for who they were and are. We remember their substance as persons, their style and manner as individuals. Student's might be attracted to a teacher's mind, but it the essence of a teacher's selfhood that is remembered. (p. 209)

## Chapter III

## Methodology

Figure 3.1

## Research Questions

This qualitative study was designed to explore the experiences of gay and lesbian K-12 educators who consider themselves out within their classrooms. To do this I designed three main research questions to frame the research:

1. What are the lived experiences of gay and lesbian K-12 educators who consider themselves out inside the classroom?
2. What are the interconnections between being out in the classroom, pedagogical beliefs, and pedagogical practices?

3. What factors support out gay and lesbian educators to remain out within their classrooms?

This chapter begins with a discussion of the connections between these research questions and how they inform the use of an interpretive methodology. It continues with a description of the 10 participants who took part in this study. This includes a discussion regarding the selection criteria I used as well as an explanation of the process followed to locate these teachers. Finally, this chapter concludes with an overview of the data collection process as well as the analysis procedures used for this study.

#### Interpretive Research

I chose an interpretive methodology (Erickson, 1986; Gubrium & Holstein, 2000) for this study because it offered me the best opportunity to understand the collective lived experiences of out gay and lesbian K-12 educators from their own vantage point. This is because "the central questions of interpretive research concerns issues of human choice and meaning, and in that sense they concern issues of improvement in educational practice" (Erickson, 1996, p. 122).



While interpretive research is nested among other qualitative traditions such as case studies, ethnographies, and phenomenological approaches (Erickson, 1986; Gubrium & Holstein, 2000), it differs in that meaning is defined not by external observation of participants (Erickson, 1986) but is "centered both in how people methodically construct their experiences and their worlds and in the configurations of meaning and institutional life that inform and shape their reality-constituting activity" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, p. 488). Thus, the interpretation of participant's experiences from their own location is the central focus of this methodology. With gay and lesbian educators often representing an invisible and silent minority within the public school community (Harbeck, 1992), an interpretive methodological perspective that centers on and honors these teacher's voices and experiences throughout the research process offered me an ideal way for making their experiences visible as well an opportunity for making their voices heard.

In addition, Erickson (1996) argues that interpretive research differs from other qualitative traditions in that it is designed (1) to understand the experiences of participants in a particular location (2) in a democratic model whereby participants collaborate with the researcher

and his or her findings (3) so that both the participants and researcher learn more about the subject as well as themselves throughout the process. For these reasons interpretive research should be designed, not to make general assumptions about large populations, but rather should be limited so that the experiences of a small group can be adequately understood and analyzed.

Interpretive methodology is designed to focus on the lives and viewpoints of people who traditionally have had little or no voice (Erickson, 1986) within a society or a community of practice. It is for these reasons that participants involved in an interpretive study often are seen as co-researchers who are encouraged to provide their own input and perspective to the research being collected and analyzed. I was drawn to an interpretive methodology because of its democratic nature which sees participant voices as important, not only as data being collected but also as an important tool for ensuring accuracy and validity of the findings.

Within an interpretive perspective, the fact that I am a member of the community being studied becomes an asset because as Erickson (1986) contends, "trust and rapport in fieldwork are essential if the researcher is to gain valid insights into the informant's point of view" (p.142).

Thus, being an openly gay high school teacher, for some participants in the study, might create trust and connection that might not have been possible to a researcher from another community (Behar, 1996). Yet, as will be discussed, I took great lengths to ensure that my insider status did not compromise the reliability of the data that I collected as well as skew the validity in the analysis of the findings.

### *Participants*

Ten K-12 teachers (five gay men and five lesbians) in California who consider themselves out inside the classrooms in which they teach agreed to participate in this study (Table 3.1). Six participants (two Caucasian men and four Caucasian women) were currently teaching in Southern California and four participants (three Caucasian men and one Caucasian women) were currently teaching in Northern California took part. Two teachers worked at the elementary level, one at the middle school level, and seven worked at the high school level. Their years of teaching ranged from 3-28 years. Two teachers requested that pseudonyms be used when identifying them in the study. The remaining eight requested their real first names be used.

Table 3.1

## Teacher Demographics

Teacher	Subject/grade	Location	Years Taught	Years out in classroom
Jodie	High school, Photographic arts	Southern California, suburban setting	15 years	6 years
Lynn	Elementary school, K-5 physical education	Southern California, suburban setting	14 years	10 years
Cathy	Middle school, 6-8 physical education	Southern California, urban setting	16 years	10 years
Rick	High school, instrumental music	Southern California, urban setting	13 years	4 years
Mark	High school Language Arts	Southern California, urban setting	14 years	5 years
Marla	High school, Math, Science, Health	Southern California, urban setting	17 years	10 years
Eric	Elementary 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade classroom	Northern California, urban setting	14 years	8 years
Erin	High school science	Northern California, suburban setting	3 years	2 years
Max	High school, drama	Northern California, urban setting	28 years	10 years
Tom	High school, math, science	Northern California, suburban setting	9 years	9 years

Since this study represents the first effort in examining gay and lesbian educators who are out in the classrooms in which they teach, I believed having the perspectives of teachers across the K-12 range was important for this research. For this reason I chose to locate participants working throughout the K-12 setting in order to understand the experience of being out from multiple vantage points within the public school system.

My criteria for selecting participants for this study focused on teachers who (a) were teaching within K-12 public school system and who self identify as lesbian or gay, (b) considered themselves out in the classes in which they were teaching, and (c) were working at a school located in California.

It is important to note that while bisexual and transgendered men and women are considered part of the gay and lesbian community, for the purpose of this study I chose to limit the participants to gay and lesbian K-12 educators.

My first step for locating participants was to create a flier that outlined the selection criteria and explained the extent of the commitment required of participants (Appendix F). The flier became an important tool which I

used when contacting organizations, e-mailing teachers who might be interested, or when discussing the research with colleagues.

My next step was to contact directly organizations such as GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators Network) chapters throughout California, e-mail school and community organizations, as well as contact professionals who I believed might have connections to the participants I was looking for.

From those initial contacts, the San Diego chapter of GLSEN agreed to let me sit at their festival booth during Lesbian and Gay Pride (July 26-27, 2003) in order to distribute my research flier (Appendix G). Numerous gay and lesbian educators visited the booth, which allowed me to discuss my study, and to get prospective participants' contact information. Seven teachers agreed to let me contact them with more information. After the weekend event, I contacted all seven via e-mail. Ultimately only one answered in order to let me know she did not believe she qualified for the study.

Finally, numerous organizations that I contacted agreed to announce my request for participants on various list-serves. Kevin Jennings, the national director of GLSEN placed my request on the national GLSEN list-serve. In

addition, the California Association of Teachers of English agreed to post my search for participants for the study. I located 8 of the 10 participants through these list-serves. I located the other two through professional colleagues.

While 10 teachers agreed to participate in the study, it is important to note that it took over three months of extensive searching to locate just 10 teachers in California who qualified and agreed to participate as a convenience sample for the study.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Because I am a member of the community being studied, I took great lengths throughout the data collection and analysis process to ensure reliability as well as to increase validity. First I separated the data collection process into two parts: Individual interviews (Appendices D and E) and focus groups (Appendix F). This provided me with numerous opportunities throughout the research for member checking. Secondly, I further triangulated the data by grouping the teachers by Southern California and Northern California locations. This provided me with the opportunity to cross compare data from multiple vantage points (Creswell, 1998). Since I live in Southern California, I began collecting data from that region.

*Southern California Teachers.* Once participants agreed to be part of the study, I began scheduling appointments to meet with each of the Southern California teachers individually as well as schedule a date for the focus group that all teachers could agree. Based on their request, the focus group took place a few weeks after their individual interviews had been completed. All interviews took place after school inside the classrooms in which each teacher was currently teaching.

As part of the first data collection process, each participant in the study partook in a "structured individual interview" (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p. 649) based on the same 18 interview questions (Appendices A and B). I developed interview questions which would answer the three main research questions (Appendix C) and many of which I tested through the use of a pilot study I conducted focusing on the lived experiences of gay male teachers (DeJean, 2001). Each individual session took approximately one hour and was tape-recorded so that the interview could be transcribed verbatim at a later date. Since I was meeting with a variety of teachers and traveling to a range of locations, I took pictures of many of the classrooms as well as many of the teachers I had interviewed in order to better reference the teacher's transcripts with his or her



classroom. All six interviews were conducted within the last week of October 2003.

Originally I had planned to transcribe the data myself, but because the teachers chose a date for the focus group so close to the individual interviews, I found it necessary to get the interviews transcribed for me and engaged a professional service to do so. Once a transcription was completed and I had re-read it to make any additional corrections, I e-mailed each teacher a copy for his or her review and comment. This provided each teacher with the opportunity to make changes to the interview if he or she felt it was necessary. None of the teachers requested changes.

Once each teacher had confirmed the veracity of his or her individual transcript, I used my computer to organize his or her data based on each of the three main research questions. For instance, if a participant's response connected to one of the three main research questions (Appendix A and B), I cut and pasted the response into a new word processing document under that category. Once this was completed all data was categorized under each of the three main research questions so that I could more accurately identify emergent themes (Appendix C).

After individual transcriptions were categorized under the three main research questions I reexamined the transcripts for surfacing themes. To do this, I re-read each question I asked the participant and then highlighted what appeared to be the main message of his or her answer. I then re-read the highlighted statements until I was able to collapse the statements into codes that I wrote on the side of the participant's transcript as sampled in table 3.2.

Table 3.2

Sample Coding Procedure

Coded data	Participant's transcript
No role models	What was your experience and memory like as a lesbian in school?
No discussions	MARLA: Right. In school I just knew, well <u>first of all there was no gay men, or lesbians out at all.</u> That anyone was aware of that it was a discussion about it among kids. So again looking back at school I know who was gay I can absolutely say for a fact who I knew was gay or lesbian but in our you know this is in the late seventies

Silence	<p>I guess, <u>there was no discussion of that.</u></p> <p>But it was not even any discussion any talk in class in school, regarding gay and lesbian anything because there were no signals in the media, it was just really kind of a <u>hush, hush.</u> And it was also my lack of awareness I think.</p>
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Once each individual transcript had been reviewed, I again used my computer to organize all of the teacher's codes under the main research questions in order to better analyze the codes collectively (table 3.3).

Table 3.3

Organized Codes for Interview Question #4: What was your memory of school like as a gay man or lesbian?

Participant	Main codes
Rick	Gender conformity
Cathy	Painful Conflicted No role models Gender conforming
Mark	Hiding Took a lot of energy Gender conforming

	Fearful Anxiety
Lynn	Few role models Trying to fit in Heard negative comments
Marla	No role models No discussions of GLBT issues at school Marked by silence
Jodie	Depressed Was not real Fearful

I reanalyzed the completed list until main themes emerged (table 3.4). The completed list of themes was eventually brought to the focus group session.

Table 3.4

Sample of Main Themes for Research Question #4: What was your memory of school like as a gay man or lesbian?

Main Themes	Fear Hiding Lack of Role Models The Need to Gender Conform
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To ensure validity, as well as to triangulate the data, the second part of the data collection process consisted of participant focus groups (Appendix F). As Madriz (2000) explains, focus groups have become an important technique because they offer a way for researchers to listen to the plural voices of others. In addition, Madriz (2000) affirms that focus groups, when conducted effectively often "empowers the participants and validates their voices and experiences" (p. 838). Thus, there were two purposes for utilizing focus groups as part of my methodology. The first was the assumption that conducting focus groups with both Northern California and Southern California teachers would further develop the data as well as allow cross checking of emergent themes held in the individual interviews. The second was my intention of providing a forum for out gay and lesbian educators to end the isolation that many are working in.

The Southern California focus group was held in my home in late October 2003 since it was a central location for many of the teachers who were traveling from locations around Southern California.

The first step for the focus group was to have each teacher review his or her coded transcript. To do this each teacher was handed a packet that included his or her

completed transcript, as well as the re-organized version that included my highlighted markings as well as the codes I had written next to their interview questions. Teachers were asked to examine the codes and make any changes they felt necessary. Teachers were given time to examine the codes as well as ask questions or make changes. No changes were made.

The second part of the focus group consisted of revisiting many of the original interview questions that had been asked of each teacher individually. My intent was to see if any of the answers would change or evolve based on group discussion. Often the question posed to the group prompted heated discussions about their beliefs and experiences. This session was audio taped and later transcribed. The Southern California focus group lasted approximately three hours.

Finally, in order to increase validity, each teacher was provided a list consisting of the main research questions and the themes that I had identified that emerged from their collective interview. I read each interview question aloud and went over each emergent theme in order for feedback to be given. Often themes led to a discussion about the collective experience of the teachers. At the end changes that were made by the teachers focused on the

actual language I used to define a theme. For instance, when asked the interview question "why do you choose to be out in the classroom in which you teach?" one of the themes I brought to the focus group included "visibility for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth." The Southern California focus group asked to change it to "visibility." Changing this theme to one word represented the fact that collectively they believed they were out not just to support gay and lesbian youth, but, to educate heterosexual students and colleagues as well.

*Northern California Teachers.* I had originally planned to collect and analyze data using the same structure established with the Southern California teachers, but due to the teachers' schedules, I had to conduct the individual interviews as well as the focus group during the same week. Because of this, I had to conduct member checking of the individual interview transcripts a few weeks after the focus group.

I conducted three of the four interviews after school in each teacher's classroom. One teacher, based on his schedule, requested that I interview him at his home. Again, the same 18 questions were asked, and each session was audio taped.

The first part of the Northern California focus group was an audio-taped session focused on their discussion of the interview questions which had been asked of them earlier in the week. Again the purpose of this method was to provide participants with an opportunity to compare their experiences and ideas, as well as to see if answers changed based on a group discussion.

In order to triangulate data, the second part of the focus group consisted of the team examining the themes of the Southern California teachers in order to see if these findings represented their shared experiences. After a lengthy discussion, the four teachers agreed with a majority of the themes listed but added to the list and made changes to some of the language used to represent the themes.

Once I returned home and each Northern California teacher's individual interview had been transcribed, I coded the data based on the same format used with the Southern California teachers. Upon completion, I sent an e-mail message to each Northern California teacher that contained a folder that held their individual transcript as well as the reorganized coded data in order for them to make any changes to either the transcripts or the codes I



listed. A few teachers requested minor changes in the codes and/or transcripts.

My next step was to organize the four teachers' individual codes onto one document so that I could better analyze the data (table 3.5).

Table 3.5

Organized Codes for Interview Question #4: What was your memory of school like as a gay man or lesbian?

Participant	Main codes
Eric	Hiding Gender conformity (his brother telling him how to carry his books, etc.
Terry	Fear. He actually beat up a few kids who he thought we gay to prove that he wasn't
Tom	Fear Wasn't conscious of it Felt frozen
Erin	Not conscious of her sexual orientation No role models

It was through this document where codes were collapsed and emergent themes reported. Again, I triangulated the data by checking the emergent themes with the themes confirmed by the Southern California teachers to see if there were any changes or additions that needed to be made.

The final step in my analysis of the data consisted of categorizing the data from the focus group transcripts by each of the three research questions in the same way I did with the individual interviews. I then highlighted the main points and coded the data. Finally, I collapsed the codes until themes emerged, which I compared to the themes that both the Northern California and Southern California teachers had previously reviewed and confirmed. There were no additional changes made.

## Chapter IV

### Findings

There's a sixth dimension of something that's going on, a spiritual thing where we at a moment of true musicality, our hearts are connected somehow and if someone hates somebody else or somebody said something to someone else that's hurtful, then that music will not happen.

Rick, high school music teacher

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of gay and lesbian K-12 educators who consider themselves out in the classrooms in which they teach. To do this 10 gay and lesbian K-12 educators (five men and five women) took part in the study. The chapter is organized into three sections based on the three main research questions that framed this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of gay and lesbian K-12 educators who consider themselves out inside the classroom in which they teach?
2. What are the interconnections between being out in the classroom, pedagogical beliefs, and pedagogical practices?

3. What factors support out gay and lesbian educators to remain out in the classrooms in which they teach?

The following section is a presentation of the analysis of the data that was collected through individual interviews and focus group sessions.

What are the lived experiences of gay and lesbian K-12 educators who consider themselves out in the classrooms in which they teach?

In order to better understand the experiences of out gay and lesbian K-12 educators, the ten teachers in this study were asked questions focusing on their memories of school as gay and lesbian youth, their experiences being out inside of their classroom, and finally questions regarding the impact being out has on their classroom, their students, the school community.

#### *Participants Demographics*

The ten gay and lesbian educators who took part of this study represent a diverse cross section of teachers working in California (table 4.1). This is because collectively they have been teaching from 3-28 years, teach in both Southern and Northern areas of California, work in both urban and suburban schools, and teach a variety of subjects and grade levels. As a group they have been out in the classrooms in which they teach from 2-10 years.

Table 4.1

## Teacher Demographics

<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Subject/grade</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Years Taught</b>	<b>Years out in classroom</b>
Jodie	High school, Photographic arts	Southern California, suburban setting	15 years	6 years
Lynn	Elementary school, K-5 physical education	Southern California, suburban setting	14 years	10 years
Cathy	Middle school, 6-8 physical education	Southern California, urban setting	16 years	10 years
Rick	High school, instrumental music	Southern California, urban setting	13 years	4 years
Mark	High school Language Arts	Southern California, urban setting	14 years	5 years
Marla	High school, Math, Science, Health	Southern California, urban setting	17 years	10 years
Eric	Elementary 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade classroom	Northern California, urban setting	14 years	8 years
Erin	High school science	Northern California, suburban setting	3 years	2 years
Max	High school, drama	Northern California, urban setting	28 years	10 years
Tom	High school, math, science	Northern California, suburban setting	9 years	9 years

*Memory of School as Gay Men or Lesbians*

For the teachers in this study, memories of their own school experience evoked a range of remembrance of feelings and emotions. For all ten teachers, having no role models, feelings of fear, and an early understanding of the need to gender conform marked their collective memories of school. As will be discussed, these experiences have impacted their philosophies about teaching, have impacted the classroom environments they create and for many, have been the catalyst to be visible within the classrooms in which they teach.

Fear. While fear played a part in many of the teachers' experiences and memories of school, for Max, Jodie, Mark, and Tom, fear was the predominant experience of their school years. For Max, fear emerged as a result of knowing that if someone at school were suspected of being gay or lesbian "people would beat the shit out of you." For Mark as well, there was an early understanding that being a gay man might jeopardize his safety. For this reason, he explains that school was simply "stressful. There was anxiety. There was a sense of fear." For Jodie, the fear she experienced centered on the homophobic climate at school. As she remembers, it was "terrible because everyone was always saying 'fag' this or 'homo' that." Tom

believes that because of the fear he was experiencing, he "did not develop or flower more" while in high school. He had few friends and felt "numb" much of the time at school.

*Hiding.* Reflecting on their school experiences, Mark and Eric remember the necessity of actively having to hide their sexual orientation. From his earliest experiences at school Mark knew that it simply was not safe to be gay. Because of this, much of his energy was spent making sure people at school thought he was heterosexual. As he explains, hiding "took a lot of energy...I think I ended up reading a lot of science fiction at the time because it was an escape."

For Eric, school and being gay were "two different realities" for him. This was because he knew that at school, teachers or students who were thought to be gay were ridiculed. Thus, for Eric, being gay was what "he did on the weekends." As he puts it, "school was like a separate life" where no one knew he was gay.

*Lack of Role Models.* The fear and need to hide for many of the teachers was due not only to the homophobic language and images they experienced as part of school, but also due to the lack of visible gay or lesbian role models. For Cathy, Marla, Lynne, and Erin, this reality marked their memory of school. For Cathy, not having positive and

healthy role models at school left her conflicted. As she explains,

Coming up through K-12, the only exposure I had to the 'gay concept' was [that] it was negative, evil, and sick. And so whatever characteristics I could have possibly identified with, I distanced myself from it, because I knew I wasn't evil and sick and perverted."

Marla remembers the fact that at school "there were no gay men or lesbians out at all." As she reflects, "looking back at school, I knew who was gay. I can absolutely say for a fact I knew who was gay or lesbian, but this was in the late seventies, and there was no discussion of that." The gay and lesbian adults she believed were gay were highly closeted, thus we not able to provide her with support.

Erin, reflecting on her own school experience simply remembers not being very conscious of being a lesbian. Looking back, she believes this might be due to the fact that she never knew anyone who was gay. While there was "talk" that a few of her teachers were gay, in reality she didn't know any out lesbians. She believes the lack of role models might have been partly responsible for her coming out so late in her life.



Looking back at school, Lynn as well remembers the lack of role models being a part of her school experience. As she explains,

I think high school was the most difficult time because it wasn't talked about, because there was no point of reference, there was no way of knowing what 'the problem was.' You didn't know why you were different, you just knew. You knew you didn't fit in, but you didn't know why.

*Gender Conformity.* For Eric, Mark, Cathy, and Russ, memory of school was filled with an understanding that safety came to those who operated within established structures of gender. For Mark who was a member of the school's football team, trying to act masculine was a way to protect himself from being accused of being gay. As Mark explains, "I was taught at an early age that being out in any way would be very vulnerable, so I spent a lot of time and effort and energy trying to act straight when I was in high school."

Rick and Eric were ridiculed early about acting "like a female." For Rick's this memory connects to being mocked for sitting with his legs crossed "like a girl" during band. This experience made him vigilant about how he conducted himself in order to appear more masculine. For

Eric, simply holding his books became a concern. As he explains, a friend pulled him aside and said

Eric, you can't hold your books like this, that's the way girls hold their books. You have to hold them this way. And I was quite ashamed. I [decided] I would never hold my books like a girl ever again. And to this day, I still don't do that.

For Cathy, not "behaving female" in school created more challenges than her sexual orientation. Cathy's memories include a strict separation for boys' and girls' activities. Because she played sports, and played with mostly boys, this placed her at odds with the school's administration that wanted "the boys in playing uniforms, and all of the girls in cheerleading uniforms." As she explains, "there was just a lot of pressure for everybody to gender conform."

*What teaching was like before they came out*

Of the ten teachers in the study, only Tom has been out inside of his classroom from the beginning of his teaching career. For the rest, teaching inside the closet might have protected them from homophobic comments or the fear of harassment, but it also took a toll on them personally and professionally.

*Fear.* For the majority of the teachers, fear was the main factor for remaining in the classroom closet for so long. For instance, Mark knew that he could be immediately fired while teaching, first in Texas, and then later in Colorado, if anyone found out that he was gay. Jodie, Erin and Max spoke directly of how they taught from a place of fear before they came out inside of their classrooms.

Jodie completed her student teaching during the time of the Briggs initiative. If the 1978 California state proposition had passed all teachers known to be gay or lesbian would have lost their jobs. While the initiative eventually was defeated, the memory lingers for Jodie. When she began teaching, she was just "really afraid" especially before she received tenure. As she explains, "I would have kids walk behind me in the hall and say 'oh she a fucking dyke'...and I was a teacher and they were the students and before I had tenure I would not even turn around to confront them because I was scared to death." Hoping to blend in to the school more, Jodie decided to try something different and wear a dress the first day of a new school year. As she remembers, it was "the first day of school and all of these kids kept coming by my room to go look at me wearing a dress, and I felt completely insecure

and unconfident and it was the worst thing I ever did and I'd never do it again."

For Max, fear of being found out to being gay led him to move from school to school every few years. He simply "would not stay in one place for more than two years." As he reflects, "I was afraid that if I stayed anywhere for very long people were gonna figure me out and whenever I thought that would happen I would move to a new town." As he concludes, "keep in mind that I spent ten or maybe 12 years of my teaching career feeling that if a kid ever said in class 'Mr. Adams are you gay?' that I would have to just leave-just walk out of the school and never go back."

The fear Erin felt centered on wondering how she was perceived by her class or later by their parents during the annual parent night. While Erin is out to the majority of her classes today, looking back she remembers being most careful and self-conscious of how she looked during parent nights. During that evening she remembers looking at what she was wearing and wondering, "do I look like a big dyke?"

*The Energy Factor.* For Lynne, Marla, Cathy, and Eric, teaching in the closet took a toll on their energy. As Lynn describes it, having to remain closeted while working with elementary school children required enormous amounts of energy. This is because "little kids ask you a million

questions every five seconds." Because of this, Lynn says she was vigilant about thinking before she answered questions. As she explains, "you have to think about what you're gonna say and you don't always say the same thing twice. And they don't forget...they're little sponge brains." For instance, at the beginning of the week,

kids would say what did you do? I went out. Did you go by yourself? Yeah...no. I mean I would always just divert the question. I just would stop answering it, cause I am not a liar, I don't like to lie so I would just ignore the question and move on most of the time."

For Lynne, this was emotionally draining.

For Cathy, having to change pronouns or having to think through all of her answers also was exhausting. Hiding simply took up too much energy. As she reflects,

That's the whole reason why I said I could never go back to a situation where I don't feel like I could be totally out. I mean it's just a whole thing you don't have to think or worry about. I mean you don't have to change your pronouns...neutralize pronouns when you're talking about what you did over the weekend, or avoid conversations of any of that.

For Marla, being in the closet professionally simply was always on her mind. When Marla came out to her friends and family at the age of 30, she knew her next steps would eventually be to come out to the students she was teaching. Having to separate her personal life from her teaching life took "a lot of emotional energy." During the year before she came out to her students, it simply was always on her mind. As she reflects, "Was there anything negative that ever went on? No. Was I burdened by this? No. It was on my mind. I wanted to do it. I wanted the right time. I didn't want it to be an agenda item. So it was constantly there."

Much like Cathy and Lynne, Eric was careful as to how he answered personal questions his elementary students asked him. Often these questions simply connected to his marital status or what he did that weekend. Many times this meant simply not answering or changing the topic. As he says he was simply "more careful...I didn't answer questions directly." Looking back he reflects, "I guess it was exhausting but it was just, you just do that...it's kind of having that constant little filter that you're running everything you say through. And so instead of talking you just don't mention it."

*Distancing from students.* Rick's teaching job as the band director at a suburban high school often means working with many of the same students for four years. For many teachers this situation would mean having strong personal connections with many students. Yet when Rick was still in the professional closet, he reflects that he kept a bit of a distance from his students. As he explains, at that time he "was much more insecure so I think I used to take my insecurity out on kids much more."

As an elementary physical education teacher, Lynne also has many of the same students throughout their elementary school years. Yet because she could not be honest with her students or answer many of their questions, she tended to be more distant with them than she is today. That distance continued when she became pregnant with her and her partner's first child. Because she had given her students so many various answers to questions, when she became pregnant, she explains, students must have thought, "who is this weirdo, you know? She never goes out, she never does anything and then she shows up pregnant three years later. What's her problem?"

For Max, that line in the sand meant that he would not always address all of the topics in the classroom that he felt needed to be discussed. This kept him at a distance

with many of his students or from the classroom itself. As he explains,

When you shut down on such a major area of your life it limits you in the areas that border it. For instance when I was in the closet I don't think I was that good on issues of race and diversity. I don't think it was limiting compared to what other teachers were doing but it was limiting compared to what I knew I should be doing and what was right for me to be doing.

As Max concludes, "I was always able to be, you know, a cool teacher. The guy that 'outsider' kids could talk to but that there was always that line you could not cross."

*Shame.* Shame was the emotion Mark mostly felt when he remained in the classroom closet. Although he knew he was gay, he remained married to a woman the first five years that he taught. The shame he felt was based on watching gay and lesbian students coming out and being more authentic than he was being in his own life. As he explains,

I began to feel a real sense of shame in a place like El Paso, Texas, where kids were coming out and talking about it in class. And I was doing everything I could language-wise to make it a safe place for them, but I was feeling a real sense of shame that I wasn't doing more.



*Why they are out in the classrooms in which they teach*

While Tom contends that he had been out from the moment he began teaching, for nine of the ten teachers, moving from a place of fear and hiding to a location of visibility and authenticity within their classrooms took many years. Yet for all ten teachers reasons to be open with their sexual orientation within their classrooms include the need to stop hiding, the desire to support gay and lesbian youth, or the belief that their openness will help put an end to the homophobia that is often embedded in the schools in which they teach.

*Visibility.* For seven of the ten teachers, visibility to support gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered (GLBT) youth or for straight teens who might have a gay or lesbian relative or friend, was the most noted reason for being out in the classroom in which they teach. Jodie notes,

I chose to be out because I read and heard and researched so much stuff about LGBT kids that don't see anything positive around them as role models and I want them to see that there's a normal, boring adult who accepts herself the way she is, has a good relationship in her life, and is proud of who she is.

For Cathy, the memory of being a lesbian in school,

where she "had no role models or mentors" reminds her of the importance of being out in her classroom. As she notes, "If I can have one kid who doesn't have it as hard" then the challenges she faces being out will have been worth it.

Lynn knows that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) youth are coming out at an earlier age. She finds it essential that she is visible at the elementary level. This is because Lynn believes that some of her students will identify in middle school or high school as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. Knowing an out lesbian early in their lives might make their own coming out easier. She explains,

They don't get it cause they're too young but they'll get it later. Oh, remember, Mrs. Thomas, remember the two mom thing? Oh yeah. Cause I don't hide it because I think it is so important for kids, they just have to know that there's people [like me] out there. And they come out in a different world than I did. I mean those kids are going to Gay Youth Alliances at what 12, 13? Or as Tom explains,

I think that queer kids and straight kids are both desperately in need of positive gay role models and it's incumbent on gay people to provide them. By

denying one's identity you're denying kids a very positive experience, which is important to the gay kids but also, obviously important to the straight kids.

*Congruency.* For five of the ten teachers, congruency was a primary factor for being out in the classrooms in which they teach. Congruency for these five teachers meant eliminating the wall they had erected which carefully separated their professional and personal lives.

For Rick meeting his current partner was the catalyst to end the separation of his personal and professional life. Being the band director often means working numerous hours after school or on the weekends. As Rick explains,

We gave very little thought to the notion that we were gonna hide him somewhere because I very much had been living alone and very much wanted to be with him, like all the time, and I mean we both saw this job as maybe being in the way of that. So when I had to be here extra hours then we weren't going to sacrifice that time to be apart.

Thus, congruency for Rick means bringing his partner to band concerts and performances, much in the same way his heterosexual colleagues bring their partners to school events.

For Lynne, too, family was the catalyst for moving into a more congruent form of teaching. This began when she became pregnant and taught throughout the pregnancy. Today both of her children attend the elementary school in which she teaches and her partner of 17 years volunteers at the school. As she explains,

My partner comes to school every Monday and works [in the children's] classroom and that's the kids' other mom, they have two moms. And I think it's actually amazing to have your kids go here to go to school where you work because it just becomes part of the culture, they just get it, they get that the kids have two moms.

Erin was faced with a choice to come out after her first year at a new school. This was because the interdisciplinary team she was newly teaching in traditionally has the students and teachers, in order to build community in the program, write and present a "People Paper" that reveals who they are. She knew in order to participate fully she would need to come out, discuss her partner and reveal parts of her personal life which had, up to that point, been carefully guarded. Ultimately she decided to participate when she realized she couldn't ask her students to be vulnerable if she wasn't going to be as well.

For Marla, one of the reasons she is out is "it's very hard for me to turn on and off part of who I am. Or as Mark explains congruency is "about being yourself and being comfortable in your own skin. It is kind of like why do you choose to be a man in your classroom? Why do you choose to be white?"

*Political Reasons.* Many of the teachers interviewed see being out as a political act. They have an understanding that being out inside of their classrooms is political in that it often challenges engrained assumptions about gender, identity and sexual orientation. From this standpoint, visibility often is the catalyst for social change. Four of the ten teachers, Lynne, Cathy, Eric, and Tom spoke directly in terms of politics as one of their reasons for being out in the classroom. For example, Cathy says one of the reasons she came out to her classes was she simply was "pissed off" for what was going on at the middle school where she was teaching. When a kid yelled out across the hallway in a derogatory fashion that, "Ms. Rice is a lesbian!" and none of the campus supervisors or other teachers in the area responded, she decided she had enough. She came out to her classes that day hoping that her open presence on campus would help end the homophobic climate she felt she was working in.

Lynne's decision to be out is political in that she sees her visibility as a way to challenge and reduce homophobia at her elementary school. As she explains, most of the put-downs on the elementary school playground are homophobic comments and names. Part of her visibility is a way to combat this negative use of language that students often take with them when they leave the elementary setting. In addition, she is aware of the gay men and lesbians who historically came out before her, which made it possible to be living the life she is living today. As she explains,

If I were black, if I were Hispanic and I had accomplished as much as I've accomplished I'd be held up in the highest esteem for all those young girls just like me. But you know what? I'm not Hispanic. I'm not black...just a lesbian. And I think it's really important for them to see me.

Tom's decision to be out in his classroom is political as well in that he sees his presence in the classroom as a way to combat homophobia as well as to challenge gender stereotypes. Many of his heterosexual male students are shocked when they find out that he is gay because he appears to fit the heterosexual model. As he describes "I create a lot of dissonance with young men in particular

when they see me they want to be like me. I'm very tall...clearly masculine. I'm physically fit. It simply makes them think."

At the elementary level, Eric sees how tightly gender is already constructed within his students. As he explains, "part of my job is to help challenge those very rigid stereotypes [about gender and/or sexual orientation] I know they are getting." He believes being out inside his third grade classroom helps students better critically question those stereotypes.

*Integrity.* For Mark, Erin and Eric, being out inside of their classrooms is about personal integrity. As Eric explains he is out to his classes because with teaching you lay yourself on the line so honestly it's hard to be inauthentic...You know you're teaching them about life, and you're teaching them how to socialize with each other. And how to interact with each other. And so in order for me to be able to do that in an honest way I have to be authentic myself.

For Erin, integrity means not asking her students to do something she would not be willing to do. Thus, the "People Paper" project was an opportunity to model what she values in her classroom. She can't ask her students to

take risks in her classroom that she is unwilling to take herself.

For Mark, integrity is about living and teaching in an authentic manner. His core values center on living a moral and ethical life. Looking back, he sees how remaining in the closet both professionally and personally broke those values. As he reflects, "I suddenly realized that that construct [of integrity] was not holding up to reality. I wasn't being fully honest with myself, not to mention my wife, friends and family...I had to make a change." Today he is out to all of the classes he teaches.

*In what ways are they out in their classrooms?*

It may be through open dialogue in their classrooms about their sexual orientation, the visibility of their partner, or how they choose to construct their classroom setting—the ways in which these educators are visible as gay or lesbian in their classrooms take on numerous forms.

*Open Dialogue.* From conversations with individual students, parents, or the classroom as a whole, open, honest dialogue is the central way that all ten teachers are out within the classrooms in which they teach. For Cathy, Max, Erin, and Tom, this means often self-identifying as gay or lesbian to their entire classrooms during the first few days of school. Tom traditionally



comes out to his classes at the beginning of school year when he is going over his classroom rules. Usually he "gives a little talk at the beginning of every school year...about the fact that he is gay" so that the class sees why respect is central to his classroom. For Erin coming out to her 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade classes during the first few weeks of school connects to the "People Paper" presentation. Max often brings the topic up during the first few days of his drama classes when he speaks about how diversity and respect is an important aspect of his classroom. Cathy as well typically comes out at the start of school often when she is talking about the rules of respect that are central to her classroom policies. Cathy explains, "normally what I do is in the first week of school I incorporate some activity kind of related to my classroom management presentation and then I come out in front of the kids."

While Max, Erin, Cathy, and Tom discuss their sexual orientation with their students at the beginning of the school year, for the remaining teachers, their sexual orientation is revealed through open, honest dialogue that is constantly part of their classroom. This might mean answering student questions about what he or she did that weekend, to students asking direct questions regarding his

or her sexual orientation. As Marla states, "there's absolutely nothing that is blocking my communication or conversation. Just as all teachers bring their personal experiences into the classroom, I do that without any censoring." Often this means answering the "Monday morning" questions from students of "what did you do over the weekend?" For Marla, the discussion of her partner is central the answer.

Like many of the teachers in the study who are in committed relationships, Jodie also mentions her partner within the classroom. As she explains, "My rule for myself, like my internal rule is if it's something that my friend across the hall would say about her husband I'll do exactly the same thing."

Lynne's sexual orientation is acknowledged as well through open dialogue with her physical education classes. Typically this happens based on the questions students ask her about her children who attend the same school she teaches at or her family as a whole. For instance, when Lynne was pregnant one of her students asked her who her husband is. As she explains, she simply told the student that, "I don't have a husband. In my family there are two moms." Typically though, her sexual orientation is more frequently discussed with the class when issues of name-

calling emerge on the playground. Often what fills the playground are homophobic comments and put-down's, that most of her students are unaware of their meaning. When name-calling begins, she typically stops the class and "starts the conversation" regarding being hurt by that language because she is gay.

*Classroom Construction.* While open, honest dialogue is the central way that the majority of these teachers self-identify as gay or lesbian inside of the classrooms, the way in which many of the teachers construct their classroom extends the visibility of their sexual orientation. For example, throughout Cathy's classroom, pictures of famous African American, Asian American, Native American and gay and lesbian men and women decorate the walls. In Mark's classroom, a large rainbow flag, a symbol for the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community, hangs on the wall next to his desk while pictures of his partner and he sit on his desk. In addition, books appropriate for gay and lesbian teens are included in his classroom library.

Jodie's classroom door contains a "hate free zone" poster and a small rainbow flag. Her classroom walls are filled with anti-hate messages, and posters that promote respect for all communities, including the gay and lesbian

community. Just like Mark, her desk contains pictures of her partner.

As a physical education teacher, Lynn does not have a classroom of her own. For this reason, her office is the central location for meeting with students in groups or individually as needed. Her office is decorated with pictures of her two children, a picture of her partner, and awards she has received for her work within the gay and lesbian community.

Marla teaches in different classrooms throughout the day. Because of this the walls in her numerous classrooms are constructed by other teachers who use the classroom for a longer period of the day. Yet, part of Marla's classroom construction includes passing out monthly calendars to her students for use throughout the year in order to stay organized and keep track of all assignments. Each month those calendars include acknowledgement of important national dates as well as monthly celebrations such as African American history month or gay and lesbian history month.

*Family Visibility.* While many of the teachers who are in committed relationships have pictures of their partners on their desks or on the wall, for Tom, Lynn, Marla and Russ, bringing that partner to school functions makes their

sexual orientation visible for their students and for the school as a whole.

Lynne's entire family is at her school. This is because her children attend the elementary school she works at and her partner of 17 years volunteers at the school weekly. This visibility makes her sexual orientation more "real" for her elementary students. As she explains, her students may not always get "that we're a lesbian family 'cause they're too little, but they get that there's two moms and they move, they don't linger, adults linger, kids just move on. The kids got two moms, okay well, let's go to the black top and play four square."

Rick explains that as the band director, "there's a lot of extracurricular activities, there's trips, there's concerts, all that kind of stuff and my partner is there for those events. I sit with him..When I was conducting I came back and we watched together, I mean we're walking around together. It's right there."

Marla's partner is also visible within her school setting. This is because, in addition to her teaching responsibilities, Marla is also the volleyball coach. Marla often brings her partner to many of the team matches and events. And while Tom is currently single, when he was

with his previous partner, he would bring him to school functions such as the prom or other school events.

*Work within school and local community.* For Mark, and, Eric, Jodie, the work they do within the gay and lesbian community, whether at the school, the district, or the community at large plays a role in being known as gay or lesbian inside of their classrooms. For example, Eric's visibility increased when a local newspaper article examining gay teachers featured Eric on the front page working with his students in his classroom. Mark's visibility as the "gay teacher" on campus has increased because of his involvement with a gay and lesbian youth center which he founded with his partner. Jodie's visibility as an out lesbian teacher also increased when she began working to educate her school and district on California's passage of AB537 which protects gay and lesbian school employees and student from harassment. She spoke at her school and at district board meetings regarding the bill. Her superintendent eventually asked her to speak to the high school and middle schools in the district to educate the staff on these issues.

*What impact has being out had inside of their classrooms?*

*Guards are down.* According Cathy, Rick, Erica, and Lynne, being out inside of their classrooms has allowed

their personal "guards" to come down. As Cathy points out, with her guard down she is simply "more relaxed" in her classroom. She further explains that this is because "I don't have this thing that I'm monitoring all of the time. I also [now] know "it's" nothing that anybody can threaten me with."

Rick explains that because his guard is down he feels he is able to give more to his students. He feels he simply has more to give. As he explains, his "teaching style has evolved into one that is much more patient" with his students. As he explains, "my methods of motivation are different; the kids need to be motivated. I think I'm a lot more congratulatory of kids, more supportive of them."

With his guard down Eric feels much more himself inside of his classroom. He explains that, "it's empowered me to be more free with my kids." Or as Lynne explains, now that her guard is down she "feels like [she's] part of the class now" because there's not that constant wall of thinking and rethinking and doing all of that...it's just more free flowing.

*Opened Dialogue within the classroom.* With their guards down, Cathy, Lynne, Marla, and Max feel more comfortable speaking with their classes and allowing open

discussions within their classrooms. Often the same conversations or discussions they would not have felt comfortable having when they were teaching from within the closet. As Cathy states, "You know, as far as I can, I have had some really real conversation with them." Lynne reports that being out has allowed her to simply talk with students much in the same way her heterosexual colleagues speak to their students. Today, she explains, "just the fact that I exist here every single day and just talk to the kids as plain as I could talk to them developmentally, you know, there really isn't an issue... I don't feel uncomfortable having discussions with them about anything now." Marla reflects that she, too, feels open to having discussions with her class as needed regarding a variety of subjects. When she speaks about gay and lesbian issues, "I do know that I very freely talk and the kids do not flinch. When I freely talk whatever the situation is, they don't flinch." For Max coming being out inside of his classroom has opened up discussions within his drama classroom.

If I can come to the classroom and say you know what? I'm gay. Then what can't they say to me? What can't be said in here? That is the big one. That's the ultimate test. It's the scariest thing. That's the most 'horrible' thing any human being could ever



possibly be and I come in here and say yup. Sure am.

Now what, you know?

*Classrooms of trust.* From Cathy, Max, and Erin's perspective, being out inside of their classrooms creates a classroom environment where trust is the foundation. Erin explains that there is "a huge social aspect" that is created by being out. As she reflects, "I think that it helps that they know that I'm going to be truthful with them no matter what I'm talking about. I think that the students really enjoy that I'm out with them." She believes that her students have respect for her "for telling them the truth. And that means a lot. And it's only one day. But that carries through and that kind of feeling carries through the whole year."

Cathy further confirms this.

I think when I'm so open and honest with the kids, I think the positive impact it has is that the kids are more likely to be open and honest with me. I'm not hiding anything. And I think they respect that."

Max believes that being out inside of his classroom has helped create trust from other students within the classroom who feel like outsiders at his school or in society as a whole. Often acknowledgement and discussion of outsider status unifies the class. As he states,

Once you realize the importance of this outsider position and once it connects you with other outsiders, for example, your experience may be being Asian...or Mormon...and mine that I am gay. We've all got this very connected and overwhelming experience of being outsiders and let's go from there.

*A barrier for some students.* Tom, Jodie and Mark believe that sometimes being out creates a barrier for some students in their classrooms. Jodie believes that being out creates a barrier for some of her highly religious students. For a few of these students Jodie's sexual orientation becomes a barrier to exploring her photography class fully. For instance, once she had a student write her a six-page letter explaining why he thinks she is a nice person and a good teacher but that she will "be going to hell." She noticed from that point on that there was a bit of hostility coming from him within that classroom which was interfering with the curriculum at hand. Jodie just "said to this boy, you know what? We're never going to agree on this and that okay, we need to just go back to talking about photo class okay?"

A teacher being out inside of his or her classroom is sometimes a barrier for gay and lesbian students as well. While Jodie, Russ, Marla each year have a few gay and

lesbian students seek them out for advice and support, Tom and Mark have noticed that the more visible they have become as gay teachers on their campuses, the less likely gay and lesbian students are likely to interact with them. As he explains, "queer kids actually in my last school did not connect to me 'cause I was too out." Mark also has noticed that since he feels more visible as "the gay teacher" in his classroom and in the school at large, it has become less likely that gay and lesbian students, who are often highly closeted at school, will speak with him for fear of being identified as gay or lesbian themselves. When he was "out lite" more gay, lesbian or questioning kids would come speak with him. Yet, Mark is convinced that "the benefits of being out far outweigh the negatives."

*What are the negative experiences related to being out inside of their classrooms?*

All ten teachers contend that being out has been a mostly positive experience. Yet eight of ten (Russ, Jodie, Cathy, Mark, Lynn, Eric, Max, and Tom) acknowledge that they have experienced some negative responses due to their increased visibility.

*Parent Response.* For Max, Rick, and Mark, being visible as gay men within their classrooms has left them

open to a few negative parent responses. For instance, when word got out that a gay and lesbian support group had formed on campus as well as the fact that Max had come out, a group of parents in the area began having meetings trying to find ways to force him as well as some of his straight colleagues who were supporting the club from campus. Ultimately, though the parents were vocal in their opposition, the club and Max remained.

Rick's only negative experience involved a parent calling the principal to complain that the school had a "homosexual militant" working on the campus. Rick was told about the complaint by the principal who simply told Rick "it would be taken care of."

Lynn reflects that she has had mostly positive experiences as an out elementary school teacher yet she does know "that there have been parents who have left the school" so that their children will not have her as a teacher. As she acknowledges, "nobody's ever said anything outright directly to me partly because I think people that knew about it didn't want to hurt my feelings."

Mark's intervention with a student who ran into his classroom for protection from students who wanted to beat him up because he was being "such a fag" caused a parent

complaint and later a school investigation. As he explains,

As I was trying to get the student home, I ran into, and had a conversation with, one of the antagonists, whom I had had as a student. Apparently he and his mother misinterpreted my remarks and advice as an indictment of his own sexuality and they initiated a complaint against me.

The district later exonerated him from the parent complaint.

*Student response.* Max contends that for the most part, being out has unified his class in ways he could never have imagined, yet every few years a student will make negative comments regarding his sexual orientation. As he reflects, "Oh there is gonna be one [student] in your class that when you tell them to stop doing whatever they are doing...he's going to say, 'you faggot' or something."

For Eric the negative student response came, not from a student in his own classroom, but from a student attending the local school board meeting. When Eric was speaking in front of the school board, an anonymous student "yelled out from the audience, shut up you faggot." As he reflects,

I actually didn't hear it myself because I was so focused on what I was saying, but one of the high

school students actually got up afterwards and was speaking right after me and said, 'you know, I heard somebody say shut up you faggot when Mr. [Parkins] was speaking and you know we need to know that that is unacceptable.'

Cathy contends that she has yet to receive negative responses from her students. Yet, to her surprise, it is her students who at times, are getting negative comments made to them from other students who do not have Cathy as a teacher. She explains, "I wasn't the one being harassed, they were the ones being harassed. I had no idea that they were getting harassed and teased." When she discussed this with her class, many of the students told her they had not mentioned it to her because they did not want to make her feel badly.

In addition to some negative responses from her highly religious students Jodie has faced negative responses such as homophobic statements written in her photography classroom. She remembers that someone wrote "Ms. [Jones] is a Dyke on the wall of the darkroom." Another time someone wrote on her outside door "a swastika and said fuck you dyke, whore. I reported that as a hate incident but it didn't really ever go anywhere."

*Colleague Response.* While rare, Marla, Tom, and Cathy explain that being out has exposed them open to criticism from some of their colleagues. For example, Marla received negative comments made to her after a local newspaper did an article examining her experiences as an out lesbian high school teacher. She later heard that one teacher was upset about the article and sarcastically wondered out loud to other teachers why an article had not been written about her due to the fact she is heterosexual.

The negative response Cathy faced from her colleagues happened when she offered to host a staff member's retirement party at her home. When a few of her colleagues objected to this idea, the staff decided to have "a ballot drawn up" to decide if they should have the party at her home or if it should be held at a restaurant. As she reflects "it just kind of blew me away. I didn't understand it and then you know, I'm not sure if I knew quite at that point or if very soon thereafter that it was about the fact that I was a lesbian and some people expressed concern about coming to my house." Fed up with the situation, Cathy withdrew her offer.

For Tom, the criticism he has experienced from colleagues centers on his involvement with gay and lesbian youth. Tom often spends time after school with gay and

lesbian youth, drives them to the local gay and lesbian youth center, or counsels them when they are having problems. Many colleagues have told Tom that he should not be spending so much time with these students. At times, even his gay and lesbian colleagues have questioned his involvement with the gay and lesbian youth on their campus. As Tom explains,

There are a lot of things that they (gay and lesbian youth) don't have that they desperately need. They have no adults in their lives who are like them...I will bend over backwards and spend any amount of time...anytime that whatever they require. I feel that's my personal moral obligation to make sure these kids have as normal a life and have as many positive models and as much support as possible.



*What are the interconnections between being out in the classroom with pedagogical beliefs and practices?*

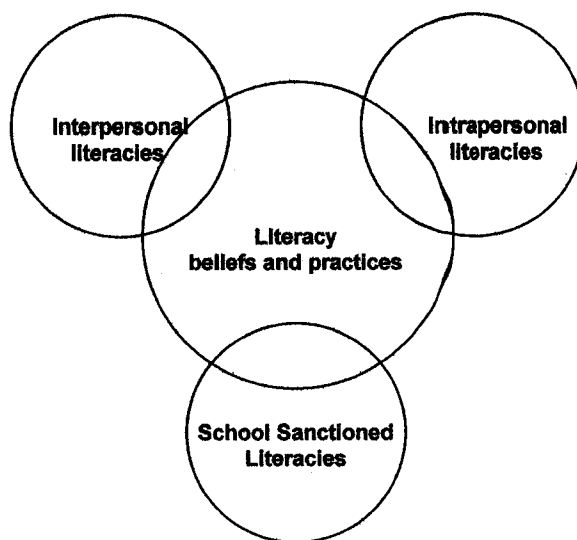


Figure 4.1

#### Literacy Interconnections

The memories of their own experiences as gay and lesbian K-12 students as well as their experiences as gay and lesbian teachers within the same system inform these ten teachers' pedagogical beliefs as to what counts as appropriate literacy instruction within the confines of their classrooms. While school sanctioned literacy practices form the foundation of their classroom instruction, as out gay and lesbian educators, their definitions and practices also includes an awareness of the importance of supporting students' personal and social growth.

What does it mean to be literate in their classrooms?

*School Sanctioned Literacy Definitions.* Whether teaching physical education, science, mathematics, music, or language arts, for these ten teachers, literacy is defined based on school sanctioned literacy definitions. For example, being literate within Rick's orchestra classroom means the ability to read and play any piece of music successfully. Within Lynn's elementary physical education class, being literate means the ability to use the "eight basic motor skills" and use them as a springboard to participate successfully in a variety of physical activities. For Marla being literate within her mathematics class means the ability to "communicate effectively either written or verbally the meaning of a concept." In Erin's high school science class, being literate is defined as the ability to use scientific language, solve scientific questions, and draw conclusions from their findings.

*How does being out inside of their classrooms impact literacy instruction?*

While school sanctioned literacy practices form the foundation of their literacy instruction, being gay or lesbian informs these teachers of the need to include and

honor intrapersonal and interpersonal literacies within their classroom practice.

*Intrapersonal Literacies.* Based on participant discussions, intrapersonal literacies are centered on the exploration of students' own personal literacies. Erin explains that while her classroom is focused on the science curriculum at hand, part of her classroom is "about them getting clear about who they are and what their values are."

Rick believes he is teaching more than simply learning how to read music and play an instrument. He wants his students to open up emotionally through the music. As he explains,

I feel that one of my primary goals when I'm teaching is teaching expressionary music. I feel some of my colleagues tend to be very technical and they get the scales and they get all the rhythms right in order, where I tend to be a lot more romantic in style in my music and interpretation and that I've always got something in the folder that's really teaching about emotion and expression.

Mark believes that being out in his classroom is really about modeling for students a new way of being. As he reports, in addition to teaching language arts,

I am teaching kids how to be comfortable in their own individual skins as well. Does that increase test scores? I honestly think it does. But more importantly, there is no doubt that it increases the quality of that young person's life.

While Tom is passionate about the science curriculum he teaches, he contends, "I honestly don't care if they learn physics or not...I want them to be better human beings and learn things about themselves."

Valerie sees her art class as a way for her students to see their individual worlds from a new perspective. While she wants her students to do well on the state standards, she also wants her students to think critically about their values, their identity and to look "beyond the little bubble that they live in."

Cathy as well is focused on working to make sure her students feel comfortable and confident with who they are. As she explains,

part of what I'd like to do is be the role model for other girls that are athletic so that they don't back off of it because they feel like their not being what other people expect them to be as a girl. You now, ...if it makes you happy go do it. Just pursue it...just be who you are."

*Interpersonal Literacies.* While school sanctioned literacy practices form the foundation of their classroom instruction, for eight of the ten teachers, interpersonal literacies are seen as an essential component of their literacy practices. This is due to the belief that for students to be successful in the world, they must not only be competent in school sanctioned literacies, but must be able to interact with people from diverse communities.

Interpersonal literacies within Cathy and Lynne's physical education classes are centered on the fact that their core philosophies focus on inclusion. For Cathy, that means teaching her students how to work and play together. She explains

I really try to teach kids to take people where they are at. And to take what positive you can get from them. Not everybody has to be the same...that's really boring. If you don't think it's boring go sit in a room by yourself for forty-eight hours with just yourself and see how bored you get.

Lynn, too, is focused on students learning how to participate in physical education successfully, but also in their learning how to play with everyone in the class. As she reflects,

I mean, because I'm a lesbian and because I know what it's like to be left out, I make sure everybody gets in, everybody participates...I guess in a way I design my program so that everybody plays regardless of who they are.

Eric's memory of school as a gay man has shaped his literacy philosophies to include much more than traditional school sanctioned approaches. For this reason, part of his classroom design centers on building a community of respect. This is shown through his use of classroom meetings, conflict resolution lessons, and activities that teach his students the importance of using respectful language with each other. As he explains,

I know the kind of bullying that goes on, and I've been bullied when I was in school. I know what it was like to be teased...and how hurtful it is and how even when you may not say something how much it hurts and how you can internalize that kind of self-hatred and that kind of negatively. And what a negative impact it can have on your learning. So in essence I am focusing on the standard. But you can't...I mean obviously I have an agenda that's a bit beyond just the standards because I want them to be successful in life in general.

Respect is an essential component of Erin's classroom as well. This is because, in addition to the science curriculum she is teaching, she wants her students to be able to learn how to work together in a respectful manner. For this reason, part of her intrapersonal literacy practices involve ensuring respectful language is used at all times. As she explains,

I think that there's just this big thing, whether it be...socio-economic status or ethnicity or religion or sexuality. There's a giant cloud of I will not tolerate anything that isn't respectful. And I often sit in meetings with other teachers who say oh you know this kid is doing this. And I'm floored. I don't know if it's the subject matter or the way I deal with behavior or what is. I'm just like wow, really? That kids said that? In your class? He would never say that in my class.

In his drama classroom, Terry describes his interpersonal literacies practices as centered on getting his students to become aware of other people's experiences. Ultimately, he believes, as they become more aware and open to the experiences and emotions of others, they are able to become better actors. He explains, "I think a lot of it is working past the barriers; barriers that we try to erect,

barriers that other people have told us to create." For this reason part of his interpersonal literacies practices involve having students "understanding our relatedness and at the same time having real knowledge and awareness. Not just as just kind of an ignorant acceptance but a real knowledge and awareness [of others]."

For Rick, working on his students' interpersonal literacies is essential to making music as an orchestra. He explains,

there's a sixth dimension of something going that's going on, a spiritual thing where we at a moment of true musicality that our hearts are connected somehow and if someone hates somebody else or somebody said to someone else something hurtful than that music will not happen.

For this reason he has lengthy discussions with his classroom about the need for inclusion, understanding and kindness to one another.

*Based on their experiences as out gay and lesbian educators, how do they define what makes for a quality teacher?*

These teachers' experiences as out gay and lesbian teachers not only inform their literacy beliefs and practices, but also inform their definitions of what makes



for a quality teacher. While all ten teachers define a quality teacher as one who is student centered and knowledgeable about his or her subject matter, for Max, Eric, Erin, Mark, Marla, and Lynn, a teacher's identity is a key factor in their definition.

Mark emphasizes that, "good teachers are real and honest and caring." Marla points out that a quality teacher is "someone who's honest...someone with integrity...someone who's approachable." Eric believes that a quality teacher is someone who "can be authentic with his or her students, a teacher that can recognize his or her own limitations in terms not necessarily of the learning, but of their own limitations in terms of their upbringing. Their own cultural limitations." And Erin asserts, "you know if things are good in my life then I'm a good teacher. If things aren't good in my life, I'm tired, I'm a little crabby, I have to remind myself that students are the same, have that same sphere of stuff going on around them." A quality teacher for Lynn would be

a black, Jewish, lesbian, single mom. I think the more diverse you are the better you are...because it affects your outlook on life. Where you come from affects how you see things. If you were brought up with money and everything was rosy fine and you always got what you

wanted you would have a different way of approaching kids.

What factors support gay and lesbian educators to remain out within the classrooms in which they teach?

While all ten teachers work at different schools, grade levels and locations throughout Northern and Southern California, they are unified through an understanding that being able to be out within their classrooms often is connected to where they work and for whom they work.

#### *Geographic Location*

For all ten teachers, location was seen as key factor in their ability to be out within their classrooms. For instance teaching in California makes a big difference for Mark, Marla, Eric and Terry. This is because, as they explain, state laws are supportive for gay and lesbian K-12 educators.

Mark moved from Colorado to California specifically because he knew as a gay teacher he would be protected by the state. As Mark reflects,

California has been a welcoming place for me as a teacher. I moved from Colorado. 'Focus on the family' was out there. I had a really hard time. I was an award winning well-reviewed teacher until someone found out about me and my partner in the school district and

then the trouble would begin. It was perfectly legal for them to do this in Colorado. So when my daughter graduated from high school I really started thinking about where it is that I want to go. And having the law on my side in California made the decision to come here relatively easy.

Marla stressed that, "we're lucky in California because we can't be discriminated [against] for being gay or lesbian teachers." For Eric as well, working in California, which has legal protection for gay and lesbian teachers, plays a part in his ability to remain out within his classroom. He contends, "I know what my rights are...and I know what I can do and I feel very empowered in that." Max asserts that wherever he ended up working he would eventually have come out, but living in California, he knows that he is safe. As he explains,

When you came out, you came out because you were ready to come out and if you had been living in Wichita you would have come out. They would have shot you but you would have come out. And I think there's some truth to that but also it's very, very political and very savvy on the laws and knowing the laws. It's very important for me to know exactly what the rules are, to know exactly what I can do.

Location for the remaining teachers centered on an understanding that where they teach in California plays a part in their ability to remain out. For example, Tom believes that

it's a lot easier being out in the Bay Area than if I was in the Tuolumne School District over by Yosemite because kids are more conditioned to have gay people around, at least it's not bizarre or freakish and I think their parents are more likely to be tolerant here in the Bay Area.

For Cathy, being in West Los Angeles makes it a bit easier to be out within her classroom since the West Side of Los Angeles is "a very liberal" location.

Jodie maintains that location is a major factor in her ability to be out in her classroom. She believes she would never have been out at her former school that was located in a highly suburban conservative community. As she remembers, "not only do you have other people on the staff that are conservative, but you have a lot of parents that want to micromanage the school and it's scary sometimes. Every time I did or said something I was scared for a day or two after."

*Administrative Support*

For six of the ten participants, administrative support was viewed as a key fact to their ability to remain out within their classrooms. For example, Lynn feels that having a gay elementary school principal adds to her feelings of safety and support. Rick insists that his principal has been a good friend and mentor throughout the years. Eric believes that, "if the administration would not support me I don't think I would be as assertive about [my sexual orientation]." Erin contends that her principal plays a big part in her ability to feel safe being out within her classroom. As she explains,

Our principal has gone out to find and hire people that are open minded and trying to break the model of traditional education. So I feel like in general there's this feeling, there's this community of you know, we're not going to do school the way it used to be...and that includes teaches being out in the classroom.

*What advice would they give other gay and lesbian K-12 educators who wish to be out within their classrooms?*

*Gradual process.* Marla, Rick, Valerie, Tom, and Erin suggest making it a gradual process for others who wish to be out within their classrooms. A gradual process might

mean coming out through small steps, such as first securing tenure, or coming out to the administration, or simply placing a picture of a partner on the wall.

For example, Jodie suggests that others "play the game, don't make waves, do things by the book until you get tenure and then find a way that's comfortable for you to be out." Tom suggests establishing job security before you take the next steps. For Marla the first step might simply be to let a teacher's administrator know of their desire to be out in the classroom. Marla suggests that if a teacher feels supported by his or her administration it might be helpful to "let the administrator know."

*Create A Support Structure.* Before a teacher comes out, Marla, Mark, Cathy, and Erin suggest creating a support structure that a teacher can turn to for support if anything happens. Marla passes on the advice given to her before she came out. As she explains, "let the administration know, or have a couple of people on your side to support you in case there's a backlash." Cathy also suggests securing a support system and to know who your allies are. For Erin a support structure could be a partner or family who is willing to be supportive if something negative happens. Or as Mark explains, "don't come out until you have calculated the risks and understand

how firm the ground is on which you stand. Make friends in the ACLU and in the [gay and lesbian] community. Have recourse to help you-your union, etc. Have resources. Don't go at it alone."

*Know the Laws.* For those teachers who wish to be out inside of their classrooms, Jodie, Cathy, Eric, and Max suggest familiar with the local, district and state laws. Max and Eric point out for teachers in California knowing the laws can be a very empowering experience because as Eric explains, "the laws are very good and very strong." Jodie also explains of the importance to know the laws not only in the state where you are teaching, but also within the union that is representing you. Or as Cathy asserts, "Educate yourself. Know what your rights are. Know how to do it."

*You Must Do It!* Lynn, Eric, Max and Tom believe gay and lesbian K-12 educators have a responsibility to be out within their classrooms. Lynn frames being out within a historical standpoint. She feels indebted to the gay women and men who came before her. What concerns her most are gay men and lesbians who are in positions of influence and yet choose to remain closeted. For example, a closeted lesbian impacts hundreds of people a day, hundreds of people in her lifetime but chooses not to reveal that part of her

life. It makes us not normal. It makes us not parents, not teachers, not principals, not bus drivers, it make us anonymous again.

She concludes, "you have to do it. You don't get to fake it anymore. You've got to come out."

Tom also feels strongly that gay and lesbian K-12 educators need to be out for their own integrity as well as to be available to support gay and lesbian youth at their schools. As he points out "I feel very strongly that gay teachers should be out and they should not be afraid that somehow ...it's inappropriate. I think that they need to get over that because it is completely appropriate."

Eric also believes that gay men and lesbian K-12 educators need to come out. As he explains,

You're not giving a hundred percent of yourself to teaching because there's always that little portion of your that's running the filter all the time so there's almost like a little delay as you run it through. It [coming out] is a very freeing experience...living a life of fear is not worth it...it will eat you away.



## Chapter V

### Conclusion

But in spite of the threat, or because of it, the people who plant the seeds of movements make a critical decision: they decide to live 'divided no more.' They decide no longer to act on the outside in a way that contradicts some truth about themselves that they hold deeply on the inside. They decide to claim authentic selfhood and act it out - and their decisions ripple out to transform the society in which they live, serving the self-hood of millions of others.

(Palmer, 2000, p. 32)

I often joke to friends and family that as a gay man, entering the teaching profession has been like returning to the scene of the crime. It still seems ironic that I chose to enter a profession in a location that once represented so much isolation and pain. Yet, I have come to see how becoming a teacher has been, without my realizing it, a way to reclaim that past, a way to create light in a place that once felt so dark.

When I first entered the field I knew few gay or lesbian K-12 teachers. The ones I met often warned me of the jeopardy I would face if I decided to be out at school

not to mention in the classroom in which I taught. Because of these warnings, my first years of teaching were filled with searching for healthy role models and mentors who could support my quest to become authentic within my classroom. I often found them in the books I read, at conferences I attended, or through professional organizations.

While today I consider myself out within my classroom and have substantially completed my own quest to become more authentic in my teaching, I was still drawn to examine the experiences of other out gay and lesbian K-12 educators, for many reasons. The first centers on my need to better understand my own experiences as gay male teacher within the K-12 system. I believe that education and educational research can be a tool for personal freedom. Within this belief, I viewed this study as an opportunity to find answers to many of the questions I had still not been able to answer regarding my experiences and the challenges that I faced as a gay high school teacher.

The second reason is to highlight the experiences of gays and lesbians within the K-12 system. It is my core belief that educational research can be a powerful tool in creating change when it focuses on topics or communities that have traditionally received little attention within

the educational world. Thus, it was my hope that the lessons learned from conducting research on gay and lesbian educators could assist those who are actively working to create a more equitable and democratic K-12 setting.

The third reason is that this study might be a valuable tool for gay and lesbian teachers. In the last decade, literature has increasingly begun to examine the experiences of gay and lesbian educators working within the K-12 system (Jennings, 1994; Kissen, 1996; Harbeck, 1997; Sanlo, 1999), yet few studies specifically address gay and lesbian K-12 educators who are out within their classrooms. It was my personal belief that examining gay and lesbian educators who are out within their classrooms could provide an important framework for others who are looking to be out in their own classrooms as well.

For these reasons, three main research questions framed this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of gay and lesbian K-12 educators who consider themselves out inside their classroom?
2. What are the interconnections between being out in the classroom, pedagogical beliefs and practices?
3. What factors support out gay and lesbian educators to remain out within their classrooms?

To answer these questions, I spent one month traveling throughout California to meet each of the ten teachers and later to conduct focus groups. It was my belief that focus groups would be an essential component of the study in that they would help increase validity of the findings, and more importantly, it would be a vehicle to bring gay and lesbian K-12 educators, teachers who are working in isolation in school setting (Griffin, 1992), together so that they could share their beliefs and experiences with one another.

At the start of the study the women and men who agreed to take part were all strangers to me, often teaching in locations and schools I had never heard of before. Yet when I finally had the chance to be in their classrooms and listen to their stories both individually and collectively, I began to realize that many were the role models and mentors I had been looking for.

The following section is an explanation of the five important lessons that emerged from the three research questions, implications of the findings, as well as suggestions for future research.

#### *Lessons Learned*

Five important lessons emerged from my time with these ten teachers. These lessons helped me understand the three main research questions, the system in which we teach, and

the power that critical self-awareness has on a teacher's philosophies, on his or her classroom, and on the definition for what makes an effective teacher. If as Hoo (2004) concludes, "democracy is a collaborative struggle in which we work with others to forge a more just and ideal society" (p. 207), then these teachers' experiences as well as these five lessons offer an important contribution to those working to ensure that schools are locations which model these democratic ideals and ensure social justice for all.

*Lesson #1 Being out means a commitment to radical honesty*

One of the purposes of this study was to identify what it means to be out within one's classroom. This question emerged from years of interactions with colleagues, administrators, and professors throughout my teaching career who frequently would ask me this question. My answers prior to this study often consisted of long-winded descriptions to the question. Yet I now see, based on these teachers' experiences, that being out within one's own classroom can simply be defined as the act of participating in radical honesty (Blanton, 1996).

Blanton (1996) explains that a person who conducts his or her life based on the principals of radical honesty "prefers language that reveals what is so, whether it's

about someone else, the world, or himself" (p. 92). For the ten teachers in the study, practicing radical honesty means conducting their professional responsibilities in a way that consistently reveals the truth about their lives. This is marked by constructing classrooms with books, pictures, and posters which reflect inclusive images of the world, by bringing their life partners to school or classroom events much in the same fashion of their heterosexual colleagues, or by participating in open and honest dialogue with their classes and individual students.

For example, in Jodie's classroom radical honesty entails answering the questions that her students ask her in a truthful way. When students ask her what she did over the weekend, her answer always includes her partner and what they did together. As she reports, "I'll talk about this exactly the same as any of my colleagues would talk about their wife or husband. That's kind of how [radical honesty] works for me."

Max describes radical honesty as a central focus of his effectiveness as a high school drama teacher.

Drama is all about exploration of identity and the difference between your identity as an actor and the characters identity and how does this character interact with this character because of who they are.

So the curriculum in drama is simply [the exploration] of the human experience. And you have to come to that honestly as an actor. You have to come to that honestly as a writer. So I mean how [effective] would it [my teaching] be if I weren't coming into it honestly as a teacher?

Palmer (1998) argues that partaking in radical honesty is an important next step for the growth of teachers and the educational community as a whole because, in his view, effective teaching is established from the authentic selfhood of a teacher. As he contends, honesty is radical in that it often disruptive to an educational system "that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract" (p. 12).

In a complementary way, hooks (2000) simply explains that we must,

tell the truth to ourselves and to others. Creating a false self to mask fears and insecurities has become so common that many of us forget what we are and what we feel underneath the pretense. Breaking through this denial is always the first step in uncovering our longing to be honest and clear. Lies and secrets burden us and cause stress. When an individual has always lied, he has no awareness that truth telling can

take away this heavy burden. To know this he must let the lies go (p. 48).

Lesson #2 A commitment to radical honesty impacts not only the teacher but impacts his or her students and their classroom community as a whole.

Committing to the practice of radical honesty within one's own classroom can be considered a risk. The teachers in this study have been exposed, at times, to negative student and parent responses or have opened themselves to criticism from their colleagues. For instance, Jodie has had the word "Dyke" painted in her classroom's photographic darkroom while Mark and Rick have both been called into the administration office to address parent accusations for "recruiting youth into the gay and lesbian lifestyle."

This is not surprising for, as Greene (1988) points out,

when any human being tries to tell the truth and act on it, there is no predicting what will happen. The 'not yet' is always to a degree concealed. When one chooses to act on one's freedom, there are no guarantees. (p.

58)

As will be discussed, these teachers taught me that working from this commitment regardless of any negative responses, positively impacts not only who they are and how they



teach, but positively impacts their students and their classrooms as a whole.

Fear was the central emotion experienced while teaching within the educational closet, for this reason making a commitment to radical honesty impacted them personally in that it freed up energy they once used to hide. Mark compares the difference between teaching inside and outside of the closet with "holding hands [with someone] with gloves on, and then taking the gloves off." Marla compares it to playing soccer while "standing on one leg and trying to kick the soccer ball." As she describes it, being out of the closet provides her with the ability to fully "participate in the game." Radical honesty for Cathy means simply being more relaxed in her classroom, while Lynn has been impacted by her commitment to radical honesty by being relieved of the stress she had previously been teaching under.

Sapp (2001) argues that, "the way to seriously work for transformation of schooling is to vigilantly work for the transformation of Self" (p. 27). From this standpoint it is not surprising then that a teacher who moves from fear and hiding to the commitment of radical truth telling would impact students and their classrooms as a whole. Jodie has seen the impact of this commitment through the students who

don't fit her school's social norms wanting to "hang out" in her classroom throughout the day. Marla is seen at times as a role model for gay and lesbian youth who have approached her for support and advice. Erin believes that being out within her classroom has helped transform her classroom into a location of trust. As she reflects,

I think that there's a bigger sense of trust. A realness. That what I'm saying is from the heart and that they can believe it. And I think that goes into what I'm teaching... I think that it helps that they know that I'm going to be truthful with them no matter what I'm talking about.

These teachers' accounts serve as a reminder that to be educated within the K-12 system means much more than being socialized into acquiring subject matter to State standards or passing exit exams (Arnstine, 1995). Often education has the potential to be transformative for individuals when it moves past traditional banking models to connect a student's "will to know with [his or her] will to become" (hooks, 1994, p. 19). This is because, "To educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world" (Palmer, 1998, p. 6). From their experiences then, it may be safe to suggest that when a teacher commits to radical honesty within his

or her classroom, he or she is helping students to move past traditional structures of education, modeling for students how to become radically honest with their own lives as well (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Darder, 2002).

Lesson #3 Identity shapes literacy philosophies and practices.

When I was being "trained" to be an English teacher in a teaching credential program in California, I was given the tools to ensure that my students would be literate within the parameters of the approved language arts curriculum. Often this training entailed being given pre-established curriculum that I was told could be used to achieve student success. Within this structure I was never asked to reflect on my own experiences of school, to consider my own beliefs about literacy instruction or how those personal beliefs are constructed. This is not surprising since many of our current political educational policies focus on "one size fits all" methodologies that require little teacher input or reflection (Bartolome, 1996). Yet, at the time I never considered that this missing piece was important to my development. However, I now see, based on the experiences of these ten teachers, that a teacher's identity plays an important part in the

development of his or her literacy philosophies and practices.

This can be seen through these teachers' vivid recollections of feeling fearful, being excluded, or having to actively hide their sexual orientation within the K-12 system. These memories were a powerful tool in the construction of their literacy philosophies. Marla can remember feeling isolated due to the lack of gay or lesbian role models during her youth. Max recalls living with the fear that someone would find out that he was gay. Yet these painful experiences have become important wisdom, informing each of them of the importance of exposing students not only to school sanctioned literacies, but to literacy practices that foster for students a greater understanding of their individual identities and beliefs, as well as greater awareness and acceptance of the identities and values of others.

For example, as students in school Cathy and Lynne were often excluded from sports. For this reason their core philosophy in their physical education classrooms centers on the belief of the importance of inclusion. Thus, while their school sanctioned literacy practices center on teaching students how to play a variety of sports successfully, their interpersonal literacy instruction

centers on teaching students how to play and work successfully with others. These are literacies both teachers believe are essential for students to participate successfully, not only in their classrooms but also in the world.

For many of these teachers, memories of trying to comprehend who they were while they were in school serve as an important reminder of the importance of students developing powerful self awareness while in their classrooms. Erin speaks eloquently of a desire to assist her students in becoming clear of their personal values. Tom works actively with his students to learn about their selves. Mark reflects, while he is teaching students Language Arts, he is

teaching kids how to be comfortable in their own individual skins as well. How empowering is that? Does that increase test scores? I honestly think it does, but more importantly, there is no doubt that it increases the quality of that young person's life.

As these examples indicate, these teachers believe that for students to participate successfully in society and the world as a whole, they must not only become proficient in reading the word, but must become skilled at reading the world as well (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

While research has explored teacher's literacy beliefs and practices (Duffy, 1981; Grisham, 2000; Muchmore, 2001), few studies have examined specifically how a teacher's identity impacts his or her views and values of literacy instruction. Yet, these teachers' reflections serve as an indication that a teacher's identity plays an important role in shaping his or her literacy philosophies.

Lesson #4 A school's leadership and geographic location impacts gay and lesbian K-12 educator's quest to participate in radical honesty.

While each of the ten teachers taught in different geographic locations, at varied grade levels, and in different communities throughout both Northern and Southern California, their experiences were unified in an understanding that a school's administration and a school's location play a powerful role in their ability to participate in radical honesty.

The first part of this lesson serves as a reminder of the importance of effective school leadership. Whether it is a school's principal, a school's administration team, or a school district's superintendent, school leadership often sets the tone and lays the foundation for the philosophies and practices in which teachers work (Blase & Kirby, 1992; Kouzes & Posner; 1999; Sergiovanni, 1992). School

leadership that actively values inclusion, honors diversity, and insists on a culture of respect can create a climate in which gay and lesbian educators are more freely able to teach from their authentic self-hood.

This can be seen in the experiences of these teachers. For example, Jodie's superintendent views her sexual orientation as an asset to the district. Rick values his principal as a friend, colleague, and mentor. Erin works for a principal who seeks out diversity when hiring staff and supports her decision to be out within her classroom. Based on these teachers' experiences, school leadership at its best helps instill safety and trust and is often a catalyst for teachers to do the same for their students within their own classrooms.

As Eric contends, every teacher, regardless of the view of his or her school's leadership, has the ability to come out. Yet, it is after a teacher comes out inside of his or her classroom that the school's leadership often becomes essential due to their organizational positioning (Harre & Van Langenhove, 1999) for professionally handling any negative reactions associated with a teacher's commitment to radical honesty. A supportive encouraging administration alleviates some of the stress and isolation many teachers feel when faced with negative responses. For instance,

when a parent anonymously called the school's administration accusing Rick of being a "radical homosexual" his principal simply told him Rick "this is not something I want you to worry about" and that the administration would take care of it. Because of this, Rick believes his school leadership plays an important component in his ability to be out within his classroom.

The second part of this lesson, that location is an important component in gay and lesbian educators' ability to remain authentic within their classrooms, in many ways is unsurprising. This is because gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered men and women often have to move away from their hometowns in search of locations within the United States where they are able to live out their lives more fully and authentically (Sears, 1991; Harbeck, 1992; Preston, 1992; Preston, 1994).

Mark decided to teach in California where he knows the laws are stronger for gay and lesbian educators and feels protected by them. He contends that, "California has been a very welcoming place for me as a teacher." For Cathy, this means working on the "West Side" of Los Angeles where it is more diverse and inclusive. Northern California teachers believe that living and teaching in the Bay Area where students, faculty, and staff often are more exposed



to gay and lesbian individuals, at times makes it easier to remain out within their classrooms. As Erin explains,

I would say geographically, given where we are definitely makes a difference. There are a lot of gay people in [this area]. So the chance of kids having family or knowing somebody or coming across people or seeing what a PRIDE sticker is or knowing what a PRIDE sticker is, I think it definitely helps. So it's not so foreign.

Discussions of location also serve as an important reminder of the significance of anti-discrimination laws that have been put into place over the years. All ten teachers noted the importance of these laws that have been established in their districts, in their cities, and within California, which provide the protection needed to live and teach authentically.

Lesson #5 A teacher's identity is an important aspect of the creation of a quality teacher.

Palmer (1998) and hooks (1994) were my first introduction to the notion that a teacher's identity contributes an important element in a quality teacher. From this early introduction, I began to seek the feedback of my professional colleagues for their opinions regarding their definitions of what makes for a quality teacher.

Many focused on the importance of a teacher knowing his or her content area as well as being proficient utilizing effective methodologies. Others told me of the need to make the curriculum interesting or relevant to students' lives. Some suggested that a quality teacher is one who is constantly learning about his or her profession and bringing that knowledge into his or her classroom. Yet few mentioned the significance that a teacher's identity plays within the context of their definitions.

I was reintroduced to this concept a few years later while I participated in an educational retreat with 35 K-16 educators who taught throughout the country. The facilitator began the session by asking each of us to discuss in-depth the one teacher who had most impacted our lives. It took nearly an hour for the group to complete the task. When the process was over, the facilitator brought to our attention the fact that no one had mentioned the subject or curriculum our teachers had taught. We only mentioned who our teachers were. Simply put, it was our teachers' identities that we remembered.

It was these experiences that led me to bring this same question to these ten gay and lesbian educators believing that their experiences and challenges they faced based on their own identity as gay and lesbian teachers within the

K-12 environment provided a unique vantage point to address this subject. While their answers did address the importance of understanding one's subject, the central focus of their responses were founded on the importance of a teacher's "identity and integrity" (Palmer, 1998). For instance, Mark speaks of a quality teacher as one who is "real, and honest, and caring." Rick sees a quality teacher as someone who is able to move past fear in order to lower his or her protective barriers. And Eric believes a quality teacher is someone who is simply authentic within his or her classrooms.

Hamachek (1999) points out that,

the kind of teacher one is directly related to the kind of person one is...sometimes in our quest for better teaching methods, more efficient instructional strategies, specifically defined behavioral objectives, and more effective methods of inquiry, we lose sight of the fact that the success of those 'better' things depends very much on the emotional and psychological underpinning of the teacher who uses them. (P. 209)

From this perspective, these teacher's experiences serve as a catalyst for the expansion of traditional concepts of teacher quality. While current political frameworks for teacher excellence has begun to narrow the definition based

solely on a teacher content knowledge (Kincheloe, 2004) a new definition must take place, one that combines teacher content expertise, with pedagogical awareness and critical self-knowledge.

Teaching colleges are important locations for this new expanded definition to take place. Currently our teacher education programs are effective at helping current and future teachers become proficient in school-sanctioned literacies and skilled in teaching numerous methodologies, yet rarely do they address or explore or confront the self, in all of its contextual locations, who is actually teaching (Kincheloe, 2004). This is especially important since influential teachers are one's who are remembered not simply for the subject they taught, but are remembered for "their personal attributes, physical characteristics, and teacher style" as well (Ruddell, 1995, p. 454). It is for these reasons that becoming "critically conscious" (Darder, 2002, p. 121) of our own experiences of school, our fears about teaching, or simply of our selves are all important aspects of the creation of teacher. As Kincheloe (2004) contends, "becoming a critical complex practitioner necessitates personal transformation" (p. 58) as well as a commitment to personal self-awareness.

Within this model, the ten gay and lesbian educators in this study are important in that they showcase how critical self-awareness and radical honesty have on a teacher and his or her classroom. If as Palmer (1998) suggests, we ultimately teach who we are, then these ten teachers serve as a reminder that we need educational institutions that are actively working not only to cultivate an educator's professional growth in curriculum expertise and pedagogical awareness, but we need educational organizations which are designed to cultivate critical self-awareness and self-reflection as well (Leistyna, Lavandez, & Nelson, 2004).

In the end, "the transformation of education will not occur by politicians demanding longer days, more tests, and some abstract thing titled 'higher standards.' The transformation of teaching will occur when teachers who know themselves" (Sapp, 2001, p. 22) bring that critical self-awareness into the classrooms in which they teach.

#### *Recommendations For Future Research*

While I began this study with three main research questions, I am now left with new questions that lend themselves well to future research. First, it is noted, based on individual teacher accounts as well as focus group sessions that a commitment to radical honesty impacts not only the teacher, but impacts his or her students as well

as the class as a whole. Yet this study does not take into account student's experiences within these environments. For some, fear is associated with gay and lesbian individuals working closely with children and young adults (Griffin, 1992; Harbeck, 1997). Having a stronger understanding of students' experiences would be an important contribution to help break misperceptions connected with gay and lesbian adults who work with children. In addition, research strongly indicates that gay and lesbian teenagers are desperately in need of support and role models while in the K-12 system (Unks, 1994; Rofes, 1994; Jennings, 1998; Baker, 2002;). For this reason gay and lesbian K-12 educators are important in that they could provide the mentoring and support these students. For these reasons further research is needed to answer the following questions: What are the experiences of students with out gay and lesbian educators? What are the experiences of a classroom as a whole that has an out gay or lesbian teacher? What impact does an out gay or lesbian teacher have on a gay or lesbian student?

Second, because this study focused exclusively on gay and lesbian teachers within California, it would be important to open this same study up to explore other out teachers working outside of California. This is because

for many of the teachers in this study, teaching in California was an important component in their ability to be out within their classroom due in large part to the extensive anti-discrimination laws that are in place. Understanding gay and lesbian educators who are out in other regions would be an important component to bringing insight on authenticity and radical honesty in teaching. This may be especially helpful for gay and lesbian educators who do not currently teach within the state and who are looking for examples of others to find ways to teach outside of the closet doors.

Finally, for these ten teachers in this study, understandings of their personal identities were an important aspect for the creation of their literacy philosophies. Their critical self-awareness about their selves and their experiences expanded their literacy philosophies to define and practice a more holistic educational model. Coming to understand this connection between self and literacy philosophies would be an important contribution to the field in a time when literacy is at the forefront of educational debate. Thus, since this study represents a limited exploration of the subject, future research should be conducted to better understand the link between literacy philosophies and teachers'

selves. For example, how does a teacher's experience as a student within the K-12 system impact his or her literacy philosophies? What are the literacy philosophies of teachers within other minority communities? Or, what kinds of personal experiences most shape a teacher's philosophies of literacy instruction and practice?

### *Final Thoughts*

In many ways the conclusion of this study represents a personal and professional turning point for me. Working on this research required me to reexamine many of my own memories and experiences as a gay man in the K-12 school system. For instance, researching and writing the literature review brought me back to my own days as a closeted gay male high school student and helped me better understand how my experiences fit within a larger political, social and cultural context. Listening to the teachers in the study allowed me come to understand the fear I felt when I initially entered into the profession and helped me find clarity regarding my own reasons for finally coming out within my own classroom. I began this study because I simply had questions I had always wanted answered. Yet, to my surprise this study became the catalyst for my own personal growth as well.



In the end, it is my hope that a day will come when the words gay or lesbian and educator will be held within the same sentence in the highest esteem. When gay and lesbian youth are honored while in school and surrounded and supported by healthy role models. When school literacy philosophies and policies are designed not simply for success on state and federally mandated exams, but are consciously designed as essential tools for students to utilize as they search for their way in the world. And finally my simply hope is that a day will come when the when the fear that some feel while attending school is quietly replaced with the feelings of safety, encouragement, support, and hope.

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